

Wake Up Better by thepartyresponsible

Category: Raven Cycle - Maggie Stiefvater, Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Timelines, Canon-Typical Violence, Crossover, Fluff and Angst, Human Experimentation, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Mutual Pining, Slow Burn, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms

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Summary:

Ronan shrugs. He's watching Billy carefully, which isn't how he usually watches Billy. He usually watches Billy like they're on separate sides of a ring and he's waiting for someone to yell *fight*. After a moment, he leans back in the seat and drops his hand out the window, ashes his cigarette. "Just trying to give you something to live for, Billy."

"I could do better," Billy says, when he can say anything at all.

"Sure," Ronan says, with an easy nod of his head and a small, ugly curl of his mouth. "But will you?"

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Look. *Look*. I didn't ask for this idea; it just showed up in my house.

I have seen two seasons of *Stranger Things* and read exactly two books in the *Raven Cycle*. So I suppose you could argue I don't have sufficient familiarity with the source material to be brazenly rearranging it to my preference, but I spend most of my life ignoring vast swaths of the MCU, and I make no apologies for it. That said, I am (hilariously) asking you to refrain from putting any spoilers in the comments, because someday I'm going to finish those series.

So, anyway, here's how season two of *Stranger Things* would've gone if Ronan Lynch got dragged into Hawkins. I've reconfigured a few things so the universes play nicer together.

He hasn't Dreamed about Hawkins since he left it. He hasn't Dreamed at all.

He'll dream about it sometimes, though. Mostly about Steve. The garden shed and that guest room Steve let him sleep in without ever asking enough questions. His hair, his smile, his hands wrapped around the handle of that bat.

Nancy, and Jonathan, and Eleven, and Will Byers.

But the last time he Dreamed was the day he left Hawkins. He went under on Steve's couch, with his head in Steve's lap and a glass of water on his chest that Steve promised to tip if anything went wrong, and he only stayed long enough to be able to look Hopper in the eyes and say, "I don't know where she is. But she's not in there."

He left six hours after the bloodbath in the school. Every night since, he's

stayed where he belongs. Here, not There. Right-side up, or as close as he's ever been.

But tonight he's Dreaming about Hawkins, and he's standing in Steve Harrington's backyard. It's the dark grayscale smear of There, El's Upside Down, and Ronan knows someone's trying to send him a message, but it could be anyone. It could be any of them.

It could be none of them.

He moves to the street, not linearly. His feet phase through the grass, and now he's on asphalt. Something passes by, moving fast. A car, he thinks, or its echo. He gets an impression of music, something angry, something loud.

Someone in the car catches him like a hook in a fish's mouth, and he feels himself spooled out, a sliver of his mind pulled along, trash caught in a wheel well, a comet pulled into orbit. He knows this feeling. It's the same feeling that lets him orient toward Steve, like some part of him has been stitched into the lining of someone else's clothes.

*But there's nothing in the car that feels familiar, just **interesting**, and there's something wrong toward the woods.*

He doesn't so much reel himself in as cut himself free.

He moves again, skimming through Hawkins. Something nearby is rotting. He expects to find himself at the Lab, but his feet touch down on Joyce Byers' front yard.

The reek of rot is suffocatingly heavy here, rancid-sweet and coppery. He swallows past the revulsion. There's something here that wants him gone, but there's something else that called him.

If he goes in the house, he'll find whoever's pulled him here.

But to get in the house, he'll have to get past the thing crouched over it. And there's no getting past something like that.

It's massive. Unbelievably huge. So big that Ronan can't see all of it at once. Black and gray and mostly limbs. It's perched, spider-like, above the Byers' house, and its head swivels slowly to peer down at him.

"Fuck you," Ronan says.

It makes a noise he can't hold in his head, some cross between a wolf's growl and the sharp scream of machinery, and then it snakes its long head toward him.

Ronan steps back, and the ground feels solid beneath his feet. He can hear his footsteps, his breathing. He's drifting too far into the Dream. He's weighing too heavily here.

"Wake up," he says.

The monster over the Byers' house leans forward, throws Ronan's whole world into shadow. It moves faster than it should, too big for that kind of speed, and he trips over nothing, lands hard on his back in the dirt.

Something small and slimy squirms in his palm.

"Wake the fuck up," he says, and he thinks about Boston, about the crowded apartment he's sleeping in, about a mattress on the floor and leftover pizza in the fridge, about the light he left on.

In the house, someone screams. But Ronan's body is in Boston, and there's nothing he can do.

*" **Wake up** ," he says, and he does.*

But he brings something with him.

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Ronan manifests in Steve's kitchen on Halloween, like a stray cat who knows how to pick locks, comes home when he gets cold. Steve's parents are in Tampa. Or maybe Miami. Ronan's been in New York, he thinks, or Boston.

"Hey, hi, good morning," Steve says, lowering the bat. It's not the nail one, so he doesn't know why Ronan gives it that pinchy, sideways look.

“Is this gonna fuck up all that repression you’ve been working on?” he asks, pointing at himself. His finger comes to rest in the center of his t-shirt, right in the middle of an image of a crowd of people staring out.

His shirt says *Circle Jerks* and *Group Sex*. Steve can see the black ink of a new tattoo peeking out from under the collar.

He’s referring to himself as an *Is this* instead of an *Am I*.

It is 6:48 in the morning.

“Is what?” Steve asks, playing dumb because sometimes it’s the only trick he has, and most people are happy to fall for it. “That shirt? I mean, yeah, maybe.”

It’s definitely tighter than it needs to be, which reminds Steve of finding Ronan in his garden shed last fall, his entire outfit pieced together from someone else’s clothesline.

Ronan looks down at his shirt like he forgot he was wearing one. “No,” he says. “Is seeing me gonna fuck you up?”

There’s that distance again. Not *Am I gonna fuck you up*. One step removed. Like Ronan is a thing that happens to people, not a person who makes choices.

When he left Hawkins, he was doing better.

“No, you’re not gonna fuck me up,” Steve says. Although, he might. That depends on why he’s here.

Steve sets the bat on the kitchen table. He thinks about the other one, the one with nails. It’s in his trunk. He could get to it in sixty seconds, which wouldn’t be fast enough, if he needed it. For two months after Ronan left, he kept that bat within a five second run everywhere but at school.

But Ronan’s making breakfast, so they’re probably safe for now.

“Anyway,” Steve says, “repression. Who says I’m repressing anything?”

Ronan raises an eyebrow. “Nancy.”

Of course she thinks that. If you’re not gnashing your teeth and rending your clothes and waving your fists at the heavens from sunup to sundown, then, by Nancy’s standards, you’ve surrendered. It’s all fight with her. All the time.

Steve never asked for any of this. If he asked for anything, he asked for an ending. Count the bodies, clean the cuts, put it in the rearview. Never, ever mention it again.

“Why’re you talking to Nancy?” he asks. “*When* were you talking to Nancy?”

“We talk,” Ronan says. There’s a beat where he would’ve stopped speaking with most people. For Steve, sometimes, he magnanimously hands out another sentence or two. “She gets shitty if I don’t call every week. Says she worries.”

Shit, Steve thinks. *Says she worries*.

Ronan’s been gone too long if he’s starting to doubt that’s true. But he says it defensive and almost shy, like a schoolkid holding up a drawing he knows is terrible but is proud of anyway.

“Nancy’s getting calls every week?” Steve asks. “Fucker, *I* worry. You haven’t called me since June.”

Ronan’s face does that *gates closed, shields up* thing it does whenever he gets too close to revealing a human emotion that isn’t rage or contempt. “Don’t worry, Steve. I told her not to fall in love with me.”

“Asshole,” Steve says, reflexively. He’s not worried about *that*. He can’t imagine them together. A lit match doesn’t date a gas can.

“Oh, asshole.” Ronan smiles suddenly, tips his face fully away so Steve can’t see. He turns toward the stove, flips open the carton of eggs Steve’s mom put in the fridge before she left. “Keep running that mouth. See how your omelet turns out.”

Steve doesn’t usually eat breakfast. If he does, it’s something he can eat one-handed on the drive to school. But Ronan’s cooking is

something of a nostalgic experience, because Ronan only knows the recipes from Steve's grandma's cookbook, the one his mom never opens but keeps in the kitchen anyway.

Steve sidles around Ronan, careful not to crowd him, and grabs the half-empty coffee pot and a mug from the shelf.

"Good to see you," he says, a minute or so later. He knocks his elbow into Ronan's, doesn't try for a hug. Not yet. "I missed these obscenities over breakfast."

"Your *mouth*, Harrington," Ronan says, like a warning, but his eyes crinkle up at the sides.

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Hopper calls halfway through breakfast. Ronan shoves another forkful of omelet in his mouth, eyes Steve's mostly empty plate as Steve pitches himself out of his chair, rushes to catch the phone.

He probably hopes it's his parents. Hell, *Ronan* hopes it's his parents. But Ronan knows it's for him by the way Steve clears his throat, barely breathing out an *um* before he launches into, "Well, Hopp, who's to say? I mean, where is anybody, really? I don't even know how to use a compass."

"I'm here," Ronan says, twisting in his chair to face him. "You can tell him."

Jesus, Steve's so bad at lying to authority figures. It always makes Ronan appreciate how much he must've tried when he looked those feds in the face last fall and said, *Oh, no, haven't seen him. A boy in the hospital gown? No, sorry. I'll keep a look out.*

"Yeah," Steve's saying into the phone, "maybe. I can ask. Do you want me to---"

"Fuck's sake," Ronan says, shoving himself away from the table. "You're not my secretary. You're not *his* secretary. Give me the phone."

Steve seems to think allowing Ronan to talk to a member of law enforcement before 8am is a bit of a gamble. And it probably is. But if Hopper know he's in town, there's only one person who could've told him.

And if Hopper has Eleven, he's already keeping worse secrets than Ronan.

"Steve," Ronan says. He moves close, crowds him. Steve doesn't give up any ground, plants his feet like he's worried Ronan's going to knock him over.

Ronan wonders who the hell taught him that.

Maybe he's been out of Hawkins for too long. But he didn't ever plan on coming back.

"No," Steve says. He has his palm cupped around the bottom of the phone like he doesn't want Hopper overhearing their midmorning domestic squabbling. He flashes wide, significant eyes at Ronan and then double-taps his fingers against the phone.

"What the fuck does---"

Steve taps his fingers again, harder, and then mimes holding something to his ear and frowning.

Like he's listening. Like he's listening through headphones.

Tapped, Ronan thinks.

"Jesus, really?" he asks. "*Still?*"

Steve shrugs and waves his hand, sweeping Ronan away like he's a troublesome bit of dust on the floor. Ronan tries to convey, with his face, how insulted he is by that, but Steve just does it again, harder, damn near whacking Ronan in the nose with his fingertips, and so Ronan goes back to the table and drinks the rest of Steve's coffee.

"He wants to meet you at the 7-11 outside town," Steve says, dropping back into his chair. He makes a scandalized noise when he picks up his empty coffee mug. "You bastard."

Ronan shrugs. He's not sorry. "It'll stunt your growth."

"I hope Hopper puts you in the back of the patrol car," Steve says. "I hope he handcuffs you and roughs you up."

"He'd better buy me a drink first," Ronan says, and Steve chokes on his omelet, damn near asphyxiates on the breakfast Ronan made for him.

Steve chokes and laughs, and Ronan should look away, but he doesn't. He just watches him from across the table until Steve finally manages to regain control. He pops up, red-faced, grinning, and this is exactly why Ronan stayed away.

If anyone asks, he'll say he stayed out of Hawkins to protect the plausibility of his faked death. But the real threat has always this. The tug behind his ribs, the feeling in the pit of his stomach that twists up taut when Steve smiles.

"I missed you," Steve tells him. Hands it away like it's nothing.

"Rookie mistake," Ronan tells him, and he stands up, grabs the empty dishes, gets the hell out of there.

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Harrington's house isn't exactly on the way to school. In fact, a basic understanding of Hawkins' geography would indicate that Harrington's house is miles out of the way. But that's the kind of bullshit, unimaginative, simplistic reasoning that Billy hates about this place.

It's never really about where you're trying to go. Where the hell is there to go in a place like Hawkins anyway? It's about the route you take, what you see.

It is also, sometimes, about a strategic restructuring of morning timelines to avoid being caught doing something as inexcusably provocative as eating breakfast in his own home while his dad's in a shitty mood.

“Why are we even here?” Max asks.

Billy turns the music up so loud that he couldn’t hear her if she screamed. Which is pretty fucking loud given her established history of not hearing him scream in an otherwise completely silent house.

Well, they aren’t really *family* after all. They don’t have many similarities. A certain *fuck you* attitude, sure, but that’s a built callous, not an inborn trait.

The thing about unusual routes to school is, sometimes, you see unexpected things. Like some shitty punk kid slouching out of Steve Harrington’s house at 7:30 in the morning.

“You know that kid?” Billy asks, but he doesn’t bother turning down the music. Max doesn’t know that kid. Max only knows skinny nerd boys she could destroy in an arm-wrestling match. Which, good for her. He can see why that would be her preference.

Steve heads for the BMW his parents gave him, juggling his backpack and his books, and the other guy, arms noticeably empty, disappears around the side of the house and reappears on a motorcycle he must’ve hidden out of view of the street. Like it’s a secret. Like *he’s* a secret.

Billy watches as Steve hangs half out his window to say something to his guest, who tips his head for a second and then looks directly at Billy.

A beat later, he points at him, finger dead center to Billy’s chest. From this distance, Billy couldn’t hear him even if the music were off. But he can read him enough – his sneering mouth, the disbelief in his stare – to know that what he says is, “*That* guy?”

In the passenger seat, Max is getting antsy. She’s holding her skateboard like it’s a teddy bear, close to her chest. Something about that, about her holding it like it’s going to protect her, makes him want to pull the board out of her arms and break it in half.

It’d be a favor, he thinks. Like yanking out a dangling baby tooth. You grow up faster with a little help.

Steve Harrington cranes his head to look at Billy, and that's what Billy sees on him, too. Someone who needs a little help growing up.

Too soft, too nice. Goes down too easy. Someone needs to teach him to stay on his feet.

But who the fuck is this shithead on the bike?

Billy stares when the guy rides toward them, isn't surprised when he stops as soon as he pulls up even with the car window. When Billy finally reaches over to cut off the music, the engines of the car and the motorcycle growl at each other like two unfriendly dogs meeting in contested territory.

"The hell are you?" Billy asks. He probably should've started that sentence with *who*, but he couldn't call whether *what* would be more fitting.

There's something ugly in the smile he gets back, but it's the kind of ugly that makes a pretty face interesting. Not that this guy's pretty, exactly, even with those stormy ocean eyes and girlish eyelashes. He looks like a boxer, all sharp angles and shaved head. Like someone who's spent time trying to make putting hands on him a difficult and unpleasant proposition.

Billy wants to put his hands on him anyway.

The biker's gaze catches on Max, and the ugliness in his eyes evaporates, takes the smile with it. Now he's just a brick wall, blank-faced. "You should get her to school," he says.

Billy rolls his eyes. "Fuck off."

"Billy," Max says, quiet. Under her breath.

She's nervous, he realizes. There could be any number of reasons for that. But Billy thinks there's probably only one that could make her that anxious that quickly. Billy's hands tighten slowly around the steering wheel, and he doesn't think about California.

"Drive safe," the guy says, leaning back. He thumps his closed fist against the top of the Camaro, a goodbye that's almost a taunt, and

Billy peels out fast, doesn't stick around to follow Harrington to school.

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Hopper doesn't put Ronan in handcuffs, but he does perp walk him into the Bronco. It feels professional and impersonal, the way his hand curls over the top of Ronan's head as he guides him into the car. Makes Ronan think of electrode placement.

He's grown enough now that an adult's hands are just his hands, just hands in general. But Hopper's a big guy, and maybe it's always going to trip Ronan up a bit, when someone can reach so easily from one temple to the other.

He doesn't like feeling small. Nothing good happened to him when he was.

It takes more effort than it should not to launch an elbow into Hopper's ribs.

"What're you doing back in town?" Hopper asks, when they're barely out of the 7-11 parking lot.

Ronan's slurping obnoxiously at his Wild Cherry Slurpee. He has another one – the largest they'd sell him – in the cupholder. He tossed Hopper's mostly-empty coffee cup out the window to make room. "Good to see you, too, Chief," he says. He grins, and Hopper grimaces. Red's not a good look for teeth.

"Okay," Hopper says, "we gotta do this? Jesus, fine. Hi, Ronan. So nice to see you. You look well. You look very, very alive. Imagine my surprise to see you looking so alive after working so hard to convince people you were dead."

Ronan spits the straw out of his mouth so he can audibly scoff. "How hard did you work? I left you a dead body."

Which he still dreams about, sometimes. Lowercase, casual, just regular nightmares. For a long time, he didn't Dream at all. For

months, it's been an unbroken record. The last thing he brought out of a Dream was his own dead body.

Two days ago, that changed.

"Which I appreciate," Hopper says. "Which was very helpful. But you kinda negate that when you show up walking, you know?"

Ronan leans his head against the headrest. He looks over at Hopper and then back toward the road. They're driving into the woods, into the middle of nowhere. "If I weren't so confident in our friendship, Chief, I'd have some questions about this secluded area you're taking me to."

Hopper snorts, already exasperated. Ronan's been in this car for five minutes. "Yeah, I saw that motorcycle you're driving these days, kid. No helmet? Seems like if I wanted you dead, I could just wait it out."

Ronan's mouth curls up at the edges like it wants to smile. He flattens it out before it gives anything away. "You worried about me, Hopp?"

"I'm worried you're not an organ donor," Hopper says. "And I am also worried that you *are* an organ donor, and your magical kidneys are gonna turn some real shithead into a wizard, and then we're all gonna die horribly."

Ronan laughs out loud. "Aw, Jesus, Hopp. You *do* care."

"I just want," Hopper says, a little loud, palm smacking the steering wheel in a way that immediately gets Ronan's attention, "for you to keep all your organs on the inside, and also for you to not flirt with 7-11 clerks in my town when you're supposed to be dead."

Ronan tries to remember if he was flirting with the 7-11 cashier. He guesses, in retrospect, maybe he was getting a little flashy with the straw. "I wasn't flirting with the 7-11 guy," he says.

"You were flirting like rent was due *yesterday*," Hopper says. "I need you to act right in the city limits, okay? I need you to be a potted plant. I need you to be *forgettable*."

Ronan broke into his brother's house in the spring. He's been

removed from all the family photographs. Erased. They're still smiling, and he isn't there at all.

"Yeah," he says, slumping in the seat, kicking one foot up in the dashboard just to hear Hopper's incredulous huff, "I'll work on that."

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Nancy's pissed about parties, and Steve has lost count of the number of fronts she's fighting on these days. "It's Halloween," he says. "We spent weeks on our costumes. We'll go, we'll have fun. Come on."

"Why's Ronan here?" she asks. The question is a loaded gun she's handing him, something dangerous he's not ready to take possession of.

"He's." Steve holds his hands out, beseeching. "Why is Ronan ever anywhere? He wanted to be here."

"You didn't ask him, did you?"

Sometimes she looks at him like he's the best thing she's seen all day. And sometimes she looks at him like this. He tells himself it all balances out, in the end.

"Steve," Nancy says, "you really think Ronan's back in town because he missed you?"

"Jesus, Nance," Steve says. He doesn't understand her. If something bad is coming, what's the point in running right for it? "You think he wouldn't tell us? You think, if he was here because—I don't know. Because that thing from before was back? You think he wouldn't give us a heads up?"

She gives him a long, measuring look. "Would you even hear him if he did?"

It's weird, like hitting a funny bone. That jarring, sunk-stomach feeling that hits when someone who knows you so well still doesn't see you clearly. Like *Steve's* the one who doesn't listen. Like he's the

one who checks out, turns inward, goes away. Like he's not circling the kitchen island at home, waiting for phone calls that don't come, or sitting in the car, waiting for Nancy to drift back from whatever thought she's chasing, or standing on his porch, waiting for Ronan to turn around, come back, decide not to leave.

If Steve doesn't hear, it's because nobody fucking talks. Not to him.

Nancy gets weekly phone calls, and Ronan didn't even meet her until they all squared off with a monster at the Byers' house. He barely knew her when he left town.

Ronan spent five days living with Steve. Less than a week, but it felt longer because Ronan wouldn't sleep unless Steve stayed awake to watch him, their hands threaded together, Steve ready to slap him, shake him, spill water on his face if anything started to happen.

Steve found him cold and pale in the garden shed and brought him inside, and now Steve gets one call every three months or so, Ronan drunk and slurring into the phone, some band howling in the background like they're being disemboweled on stage. And Nancy gets a call every week.

It's stupid to be jealous, but he is anyway. Jealous, and mad, and mad at himself for being jealous. He chases himself around and around about it, frustrated and angry and ashamed, and he's so worked up that Billy Hargrove topples him to the ground in practice without even really trying.

"Shit, Harrington," Hargrove says, grinning down at him. "Your boyfriend wear you out?"

"Which one?" Steve asks, which probably isn't the kind of encouragement Hargrove needs. It's just that Hargrove keeps searching for a weakness, and Steve knows better than to let him think he's found one.

Not that Steve has boyfriends. Not that Ronan would be one, if he did. But Ronan's some kind of weakness, and Steve doesn't want Billy thinking about him at all.

Billy laughs and reaches down, grabs him by the arm. Somehow, when Billy Hargrove helps him up, it feels less like assistance and more like an attempted kidnapping. Steve doesn't shake him off, but he doesn't stay close, either.

Billy, whose stubborn dedication to bothering the shit out of Steve really flies in the face of that no effort image he cultivates, jogs along beside him. "Does the princess know she has competition?"

Steve sidesteps around him, shoves him back. They're supposed to be playing a game. Well, Billy's probably playing two. "Is that why you were creeping outside my house this morning, Hargrove? Looking for Nancy?"

Billy hooks his arm around Steve's waist, heaves him off his feet, and then hip checks him to the ground. The coach's whistle stays silent. Steve's elbows have been some shade of bruised ever since Billy Hargrove surfaced in this town.

"Who is he?" Billy asks. He's staring down at Steve again, too intense, too focused.

He tries so hard to be cool, but he wants it too much. There's something about the way he wants things that makes Steve feel like giving him nothing at all. Too greedy, too hungry, too loud, too *much*.

"Newspaper delivery guy." Steve picks himself up this time.

"Bullshit," Billy says. And then, "That's some Goddamn newspaper, Harrington."

And yeah, it sure would be. Ronan, with notebook paper crumpled around bricks, throwing handwritten messages through people's kitchen windows: *Hello, Hawkins. You're fucked.*

"Don't hang around my house," Steve says. "It's weird, man. What were you even doing?"

"Driving," Billy says.

Steve nods. Slow, like he's thinking it over. "Seemed kinda like you

were parked.”

“Seemed kinda like that motorcycle was parked around back,” Billy says. “He hiding from the neighbors? Was he there all night? Do your parents know?”

His parents haven’t met Ronan, and he lived in their house for days. He was there *while* they were home. It’s amazing, really, how much they can choose not to see.

“My parents read the newspaper, Billy,” Steve says. “I think they probably know about delivery people.”

Billy laughs. Sharp, like it surprised him. When he smiles, it’s a smile Steve hasn’t seen before. Almost sweet.

“Next time you wanna lie about him,” Billy says, twisting back toward the game, one arm out to keep Steve trapped behind him, “just say he’s your dealer.”

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When they finally make it to the cabin in the middle of fuck-off nowhere, Eleven empties out of the place like it’s on fire. “Thirteen!” she says and then, hastily, “Ronan!”

She calls him that more than he ever thought of himself that way. But she was raised in it. They didn’t get him until his father was dead, and, by then, he was too indoctrinated in being his father’s *Ronan* to ever really be their *Thirteen*.

Still, some part of him answers to it. Once, when a TV in a laundromat was tuned to Powerball footage, he’d flinched to attention, spilling quarters everywhere, when the blonde called “*Thirteen!*” like a full sentence.

But that was months ago. And, right now, it doesn’t matter.

Eleven’s happy to see him. Well, given how little social interaction she’s been getting, she’d probably be happy to see a dead goldfish.

He lifts her off her feet, swings her around. "Hey, kid. Nice hair."

"Where's yours?" She reaches up to touch him, face troubled, patting at his head. "Doesn't it grow?"

It does, and he hates it. Makes him think of being held down while they cut it off. They needed bare skin for the electrodes. They explained it to him, and then they came at him with clippers, and he slapped them out of the soldier's hand.

When they restrained him, he bit the first guy who got close, but he couldn't get a decent grip through his shirt. Still, he bit like he meant it, shook his head, a dog trying to crack bone. Left bruises, if nothing else.

Then they drugged him, and it didn't matter. He couldn't move his arms. They tipped his head forward to get at the hair at the back, clippers pressed to the vulnerable skin at the nap of his neck, and spit sluiced forward out of his mouth, dribbled down his chin, splattered across his lap

He thinks maybe he'd combust if that ever happened to him again. He thinks he'd shrink down and explode.

So he shaves his own head, and fuck them anyway.

"I don't look as good as you. I'm not as pretty." Ronan tugs gently at her curls. "Trust me, this is the best look for me."

"You look cool," she tells him, openly gawking at his shirt.

If he'd known he was going to see her today, he would've picked a different band. He can see Hopper across the room, eyes rolling toward the heavens, mentally preparing himself to explain terms like *group sex* and *circle jerk* to a preteen girl.

Usually, Ronan means to be exactly the kind of asshole he is. But sometimes it's an accident.

"I got you this," Ronan says. He hands her the bucket of Wild Cherry Slurpee, and her eyes damn near bug out of her head.

“Half now,” Hopper says. “Half for dessert after dinner.”

She looks at him, eyes narrowed. After several seconds of thought and mad Slurpee guzzling, she reluctantly drops the straw out of her mouth. “Half-happy,” she announces.

“Compromise,” Hopper agrees.

Ronan looks between them. In the lab, they lived in the present tense. They weren’t agreeing to anything. But compromise is agreeing to trust, in the other half of the equation and in the idea that there’s going to be a future.

You only agree to be *half-happy* now if you believe you’ll get to be *half-happy* again later.

In the lab, the only guarantee they had about the future was that it was going to hurt.

“Thank you,” El says, hands still curled around the Slurpee. The cup is so giant that it makes her seem smaller than she is, makes him think of times he doesn’t think about anymore.

“Yeah, sure,” Ronan says.

The truth is, he’s bringing her a Slurpee months and months too late. When he left Hawkins, he told himself, if she needed him, she’d let him know. She’d reach out if she had to. If she wanted to go with him, all she had to do was tug on his thoughts, reel him back in.

But their history is just years and years of Ronan not being worth her faith. Years of him not helping her. Years of him being difficult and stubborn, forcing the scientists to turn to someone more pliant, someone more eager to please. Their history is just him, angry and selfish and useless, making her the better option.

And here he is, a year after she needed him, showing up, needing her.

He takes the things he was going to ask, sifts through them. Takes out all the parts that will drag her back into a thing she never should’ve been involved in.

“All right, kid,” he says. “Show me what you’ve been up to.”

2. Chapter 2

Jim doesn't know how to talk to Ronan. He's never known how to talk to him. Part of the problem is the kid reminds him too much of a near-infinite list of mouthy teenage boys who've wrecked cars and started fights and vandalized the police department. The other part is he reminds him too much of Eleven, has the same eerie habit of studying any bit of kindness with a scientist's interest in some new, unknown element.

"So," he says, when he's driving Ronan back to the 7-11 after lunch, "why are you here?"

Ronan stares out the windshield. His eyes catch on mailboxes, on other people's cars. Hopper wonders if Ronan knows he still watches people like they're animals in a zoo. "You think Hawkins isn't a travel destination?"

His tone is so sarcastic that it's easy to let that be the whole of his message. You ask Ronan any question, and half of his answer is always going to be *And fuck you for asking*.

But a *travel destination* isn't a place you live. However Ronan feels, this isn't a homecoming. And home is the only place you ever go without a purpose, which means Ronan is here for a reason.

"Do you ever cut the shit?" Jim asks.

Ronan smirks over at him. He's good at that. He's got a gift for smiling like he's daring someone to smack that smile off his face. Maybe, if Ronan issues the invitation, it feels like his choice when someone follows through.

Ronan's got a lot of issues with authority figures. Jim figures those issues might even predate the period of his life when authority figures considered him some combination of rat and blood bag and doll.

"Look," Jim says, "do you know what's going on with the pumpkins?"

Ronan blinks at him. He looks confused, and then pissed at Jim for confusing him. Which is pretty fucking nervy, considering he's been baffling the hell out of Jim since day one. "They're gonna turn into carriages and take me to a ball?"

A simple *No, I don't know about the pumpkins* would've been more helpful, but also wildly out of character. "They're rotting. Whole fields of them. And now you're here."

Ronan narrows his eyes at him. "The fuck do you think I did, Hopper? You think I spent last night in my denim overalls out in the field, doing some kinda agrarian sabotage? With fucking what, Hopp? Bleach and Jim Beam?"

Jim silently concedes the point that this kid probably wouldn't know the first thing about poisoning pumpkins. But, all the same, if Ronan Lynch decided the pumpkins in Hawkins needed to go, he doubts a little bit of agricultural ignorance would stop him.

"I just wanna know," Hopper says, "how much danger we're in."

Ronan leans against the car door and chews on the leather bracelets around his wrist. "I don't know."

Hopper makes the conscious decision not to strangle the steering wheel. "You don't know?"

"s what I said." Ronan mumbles it, teeth still caught on his bracelet.

Jim also makes the conscious decision not to strangle the traumatized teenager in his passenger seat. "Okay," he says, instead. He uses his calming voice, the one he uses when El levitates half the furniture in the cabin during a bad episode. "Is there any chance you could give me some kind of estimation?"

Ronan snorts. Jim can practically see his hackles rise at that tone. But he swallows it back after a moment, drums his fingers on the dashboard.

"Something followed me out of a Dream a couple nights ago," he says. "Little worm thing. I smashed the shit out of it."

Jim's understanding of Ronan's ability is limited to the hints El sometimes gives him. *He's always half in the Upside Down*, she'd said, once. *He dreams about it. He's a portal.*

But he's more than a portal, because he can build things in the Upside Down. He built his own body over there and broke it, too. Brought back a version of himself with his own guts ripped out. And it was a desperation play, sure, and a practical move, but Jim always figured you'd have to hate yourself something fierce to wreck your own body so personally, to tear into it like a present on Christmas morning.

Jesus, he thought, still thinks, *a broken neck would've sufficed.*

"Did you," Jim says, and then stalls. Ronan doesn't appreciate soft questions, but asking if he intentionally built a monster seems likely to cause offense.

Hell. With Ronan, what *doesn't* cause offense?

"Did I make it?" Ronan rolls his eyes.

"Yeah," Jim says. "Was it yours?"

Ronan's face goes blank. Jim's only seen that a handful of times. Ronan doesn't usually hide things unless he's hiding them for someone else. "You see Will Byers much these days?" he asks.

Jim thinks about Will, about Joyce. About those episodes Will's been having. "Maybe. Why?"

Ronan shrugs. He's unnaturally still. No fidgeting, no chewing, no messing with the radio. "Because, if you don't, maybe you should."

- - -

The Halloween party is not going well. Nancy's stormed up like something that deserves an emergency siren, and Ronan's skulking

around in their wake with a stolen bottle of a whiskey and a look in his eyes like a trap waiting to spring. “Just,” Steve says, waving his hands a little. “Be cool. Okay? *Okay*, Ronan?”

Ronan isn’t even in costume. He’s just in his normal clothes.

He let Nancy put eyeliner on him, though. Set the beer he was having for dinner aside for exactly five seconds while she crowded close, held his face in place with a hand wrapped around his jaw. But the ripped jeans, the *Agent Orange* shirt with the sleeves cut off, the tattoo, the snarl, that’s just how he conducts himself.

“I am being,” Ronan says, “so cool.” He takes a long pull from the bottle. His eyeliner is smudged all to hell. He flutters his lashes when he catches Steve looking.

“Oh, Jesus,” Steve says, recognizing that look for the warning sign it is. He doesn’t know why Ronan and Nancy have to *coordinate* with this shit. He doesn’t know why they’re losing it at the same time.

“I’m just enjoying the spectacle,” Ronan says.

“We’re stupid teenagers,” Nancy tells him, authoritatively. She leans over Steve’s back to do it, presses against him to talk shit about him to Ronan. “We’re being stupid teenagers tonight.”

Ronan tips his head back and laughs.

Steve really needs another beer.

He gets trapped by people before he can make it that direction. He and Nance, chatting away with Jennifer and Alicia from English while Ronan posts up a foot away, back to the wall, expression like a bulldog about to puke.

They’re nice girls. Kinda skittish, out of their depth, seeking out any familiar face they can find. They flee like mice from a forest fire when Billy Hargrove makes his way over.

Billy’s not wearing a shirt. Of all the people at this party who could’ve gone with no shirt, open leather jacket as a costume choice, Steve doesn’t know why the hell it had to be Hargrove. He’s got some

kind of enduring grudge against shirts that Steve's only beginning to fathom the depths of.

But Billy seems like he could hate with a depth that defies any measurement system known to man. He and Ronan have that in common.

The two fawning idiots who used to fawn over Steve taunt him – “We got ourselves a new Keg King, Harrington!” and “Eat it, Harrington!” – but Billy doesn't say a damn thing. Just stares. There's something magnetic about him. It's probably the booze.

Billy doesn't seem stable. There's a weird light in his eyes, like he's barely balanced over a long drop, like he's being pulled toward the edge. Steve gets the uneasy feeling that a drunk Billy Hargrove might be some kind of dangerous.

“Didn't you use to run this town, Harrington?” he asks. He's knocking on a door. *Come out, come out.* “King Steve?”

There's nothing behind that door anymore. A body, maybe.

To his right, Ronan slithers awake.

Jesus Christ, Steve thinks.

Nancy turns and leaves, beelines for the kitchen. “Enjoy the keg,” Steve says, head tipped toward Nancy. “Ronan, come on,” he says, as he goes, but it's no use. It's too late.

Trap tripped, and Ronan's gone, following the line of Billy Hargrove's shoulders through the party.

Steve follows Nancy. Sometimes, at least, Nancy lets him look after her.

- - -

It's a good party, could be better. Predictable, sure, but the beer is free, and Billy's chances of finding decent company go up the more he drinks and the more they drink, although there's an outer limit where it nosedives back down. He could draw it out, if he wanted to. He understands what it is.

Parabolic.

He's not a fucking idiot. Whatever people think. Back in California, they knew how smart he was. Back in California, they knew a lot of things about him.

And now he's here, in Nowhere, Indiana, and he's the only one who knows anything.

Which is why he knows to regard this asshole with some caution. Harrington's one thing. There's something weirdly tangled in him, something that will push back, if Billy could just find the right point of impact. But *this* kid, this shithead. Billy knows what he is.

That's a raw nerve walking. Every point of impact is a trigger waiting to pull.

Billy makes him work for it, a little. Not much. The truth is, he doesn't have the patience. It's Halloween, and he's more than halfway drunk, and he isn't worth Steve Harrington's time, but *this* guy's been tailing him since his coronation as Keg King.

His usurpation? Revolution?

Whatever.

He gets bored after ten minutes, and then he walks away from the others, lets the biker catch him alone.

"Don't fuck with Harrington," he says, as an opener. Straightforward, sure, but with a half-smile that says *Do it, do it in front of me, give me a Goddamn reason.*

Billy knows all about baited traps.

"You his bodyguard now?" Billy asks. He smiles back, shows his

teeth. There are other games he likes better, but he's learned to play this one, too. "I heard you were a delivery boy."

He's tall enough to play bodyguard. Taller than Billy, taller than Steve. 6'1, maybe 6'2. Should have the decency to be built on leaner lines with a height like that, but there's nothing about this guy that seems decent.

"I'm the guy telling you," he says, slow and clear, like Billy's too stupid to put together anything not handed to him in labeled pieces, "that you don't fuck with Steve Harrington."

Billy can't help it. Doesn't want to. He laughs. "I don't even know who the fuck you are. Where are you from?"

"Doesn't matter," he says. He's wearing *eyeliner*.

"What's that shit on your eyes?" Billy asks, openly staring. "You're wearing eyeliner, and you're gonna threaten me?"

"I'd threaten you in nothing at all," he sneers back. "And if you've got a problem with anything I'm wearing, feel fucking free to try to take it off me."

God. *God*. Billy's missed this. Nobody in this town wants to fight, not really. And the ones who do aren't any good at it. Whole town full of soft, pretty mouths. Whole town of careful hands. Whole town of good manners and inside voices and eyes that go doe-wide the second Billy shows any part of himself.

Billy finishes his beer, throws the bottle at the ground. The other boy doesn't flinch when it shatters, but his hand tightens protectively around that whiskey. "I'm empty. You gonna share?" Billy asks, just to be an asshole.

It surprises the hell out of him when the guy shoves the bottle into his chest. No hesitation at all. "I thought you were the Keg King. You drink grownup shit too?"

"I do all kinds of grownup shit," Billy tells him.

There's an interested spark in his eyes, a quick, assessing look that

drags down Billy's body. Billy wants to punch him, just for that. He stretches his shoulders out instead, flexes his abs. When he drinks, he tips his head back, drinks even more than he usually would.

Shows off. Why not? If the audience is there, you go on.

"What's your name?" Billy asks.

He gets a shitty look, an eyebrow that asks *What the fuck is wrong with you?* "That really want you want to ask me about?"

Billy passes the bottle back and then reaches up to run his palm over that shaved head, feel the babysoft hair just starting to grow. "What's with the hair? You got cancer?"

The guy shoves him back with a hand pressed flat against his collarbones, almost at his throat, but not quite. His touch is cold against Billy's overheated skin. Feels good. "You touch me like that again, and one of us is gonna be terminal."

Billy laughs. "There some other way I'm supposed to touch you?"

The guy rocks forward on the balls of his feet, stretches his neck, chin tipping right then left. He has one hand curled around a bottle of whiskey and the other is curling into a fist. He steps forward, close. Closer than he needs to. Closer than boys get with other boys, especially ones they don't know.

Unless they're fighting. Or fucking.

They're standing in the backyard of a high school party. There's only one way this is going to go, if it goes anywhere at all. Billy's hands are free. He's drunk enough that he won't feel it til morning anyway.

He's ready. He picked this. Wants it, maybe.

"I sure as hell wouldn't recommend it," the guy says. And then he pushes the bottle back into Billy's chest and steps back, lets go.

Billy catches it before it falls. There's still a solid quarter of a bottle left.

“Have a goodnight, Keg King,” the guy says, calling it back over his shoulder.

“Billy,” he says, for no Goddamn reason at all.

“Ronan,” he says. And then, even louder, so loud that half the kids outside hear it, “Don’t fuck with Steve Harrington.”

- - -

Nancy’s trashed, but Ronan comes back inside with clean hands and a strange, smug smile on his face, so Steve’s calling it 50/50, which is almost 60/40, which is almost a passing grade. He defies anyone in the world to do better. When these two get like this, they’re like cats with lit tails and chainsaws for paws.

He sticks close to Nancy, even though she’s making it very clear she doesn’t want him anywhere near her. That’s fine. That doesn’t bother him. It’s not like it’s a *thing*. It’s not like Steve stays awake sometimes wondering why the hell all the people he cares about never seem to want to be around him.

Jonathan showed up, thank God. He didn’t wear a costume, but he’s make-believing like he wants to be here. He draws Ronan in, and now they’re standing together, doing that thing they like to do where they throw out band names, call each other a poser, and then jostle like puppies relearning how to fight without teeth.

So at least there’s that. At least, after a cup of punch goes all over Nancy, turns her white sweater pink, after it seems like half the party goes dead silent to stare, he can tell himself he still hears Jonathan laughing, hears Ronan saying *you fucking poser, Jonathan, I swear to fuck* like he’s reciting love poetry.

It’s all great. It’s all fine.

It’s all *bullshit*.

Which he knows. He *does*. He doesn't know why the hell people think he doesn't know. He doesn't know why Nancy thinks it makes her special, that she says it, that she brings it up, that she keeps digging around in old graves.

What the hell does she expect to find? It's just bones down there. And, if she digs deep enough, God knows what else she'll find. What she'll unearth. What she'll bring back.

Steve fights those things at night. He dreams about the monsters from last fall all the time. About all of it. He doesn't know why the hell Nancy makes him look at it in the light. The light is supposed to be safe.

He's a coward. He's bullshit.

He's leaving.

"Jonathan," he says, crashing into him. He grabs Jonathan by the shoulder, and Jonathan's skittish and squirrely except when you need him, and then he squares up like an anchor, like a wall. "Nancy's in the upstairs bathroom. Take her home? She's—I can't—she—"

"Yeah," Jonathan says. Wide-eyed, serious. God, his bangs are terrible. Why does he do these things to himself? Someone needs to bury every pair of scissors in the Byers household. "Okay, Steve. Sure. She's okay?"

"She's fine. I'm bullshit," Steve says, and then takes a breath, shakes his head. Gathers all that venom in his mouth and forces it back down his throat. "She's drunk. She just needs to go home."

Jonathan nods. "Okay." He moves to brush past Steve and then pauses. He reaches up, pats Steve awkwardly on the shoulder and then squeezes, just for a second. "She didn't mean it. Whatever it was."

Like Jonathan Byers is really going to stand there and tell Steve Harrington that sometimes mean drunks don't mean anything by it.

"Wanna smoke?" Ronan asks, when Jonathan's been gone for almost

a full minute and they've passed Ronan's beer back and forth til it's empty.

"I wanna drive into a fucking lake," Steve tells him.

A girl crowded next to him shoots him a startled look, and Ronan glares back at her until she finds somewhere else to be.

"C'mon, Steve," he says. He's watching something play out over Steve's shoulder. If Steve had to guess, he'd guess he was watching Jonathan lead Nancy down the stairs. "It's Halloween. Let's raise some hell."

When they leave, they brush past Hargrove. He's drinking Ronan's whiskey, but he perks up when he sees them, starts to drop the bottle away from his mouth like he has something to say. Ronan, still walking, palms the bottom of the bottle and pushes up, flooding Billy's open mouth with whiskey.

Hargrove's still choking when Steve slams the Beamer's door shut.

"Don't start anything with him," Steve says, as he slides the key into the ignition.

Ronan's eyes are locked on Billy, watching as he wipes whiskey off his bare chest. "I'm not starting anything," he says.

Steve gets out of there before Ronan doesn't start his way into a stupid, shitty brawl at an already trashy Halloween party Steve wishes he'd never gone to.

They end up out by the quarry, sprawled out on the hood of the car, backs braced on the windshield. Steve turns off the lights with the finality of stabbing himself in the stomach and kicks the door open like he's ripping the blade from hip to hip. He lays next to Ronan, feeling gutted, feeling mean, feeling like he wants to get his hands around something and tear it apart.

Ronan's getting drunk, keeps trying to pass him the bottle.

"I don't want it," Steve says. "Fucking *stop it.*"

“You should relax,” Ronan says, unmoved by Steve’s rage. And why would he be? Next to Ronan, all of Steve’s anger is just a man spitting into the sea.

Steve almost chokes on how much he wants to slam his fist through the windshield. “Oh, *now* it’s fine for me to relax. *Now* it’s not bullshit.”

Ronan sighs. He’s right there, making himself heavy and steady and stable. He’s sedating himself into it. He’s doing it for Steve. For some reason, that makes Steve want to scream.

They’re out here in the dark. Last fall, they pulled a body from that water.

There could be anything in the trees. There could be anything in the water. There could be anything anywhere.

It’s so fucking dark. He’s scared, and he’s angry, and he doesn’t know why the hell Nancy wants to feel this way all the time.

“She doesn’t love me,” he says. His voice breaks, just a little. Ronan makes a noise in the back of his throat like something’s breaking in him, too.

“She loves the shit out of you, Harrington,” he says. “She’d die for you.”

Nancy would die for any of them. Nancy would die to make a point. Nancy would probably be happy to die to save Steve, because then she’d never have to fucking see him again.

Steve breathes out. In the moonlight, he can almost see the fog of his breath. It’s not safe, here with Ronan in the dark. But it feels isolated. Removed from normal life. He could hand Ronan any ugly part of him, and Ronan would never flinch. Ronan’s made of ugly parts.

It’s a miracle, really, that he’s so Goddamn beautiful.

Except a miracle implies it happened by accident, and Ronan did all that forging and stitching and necromancing himself.

"She's not in love with me." It feels shameful to say. Makes him feel like a failure. *My girlfriend doesn't love me, and my parents have fled the house.*

Ronan throws the bottle into the water. It whistles through the air, crashes into the black, sends ripples fleeing out across the water. Ronan's rage always makes some kind of mark on the world. Steve's never accomplishes a damn thing.

"She's got her own shit," Ronan says.

Like Steve doesn't have his own shit. Like *Ronan* doesn't. Like they all don't.

"People, sometimes." Ronan's face is impossible to read in the dark. He shifts closer, a line of warmth all down Steve's side. "They want to want something so bad that they almost make it real."

Steve locks his jaw against the sting of those words, shoves the heels of his hands into his eyes to hold everything back. He can't see. Everything's dark. Everything's dark, and, in the dark, his stupid pathetic feelings don't matter. In the dark, he could get eaten alive at any second.

In the dark, it doesn't matter that he's something Nancy Wheeler has to try to force herself to love.

"She loves you," Ronan says. "You love her. You're gonna wanna keep that, whatever else happens."

"Fuck you," Steve says. "What the hell would you know about it?"

Ronan's still and silent next to him. Like a corpse. Like nothing at all. After a long stretch of silence, he sits up, breaks that wall of contact, leaves Steve all alone. "Absolutely fucking nothing," he says, and he slides off the hood, walks toward the water.

Steve shoves up on his elbows and watches while Ronan lights a cigarette. For a second, he's a point of light, the sharp angles of his face glowing white, all that smudged eyeliner turning his eyes into empty staring sockets.

He looks dead. He *is* dead.

Maybe they're all dead.

Ronan flicks his lighter shut, and then Steve can't see him at all.

- - -

Steve's angry in the morning. He's probably not aware of it yet. Ronan's keyed into anger; he can read it so easily that sometimes it's like the rest of the world is colorblind and all he sees is red.

Ronan makes him pancakes, gives him something he can cut into tiny pieces.

"Why are you here?" Steve asks, when he's dissected his breakfast and is poking his fork around in its syrupy guts.

Ronan shrugs, makes an elaborate ritual out of chewing. "Cuz I can't eat breakfast poolside without a mimosa, and your mom has shitty taste in champagne."

Steve's gestures get unusually precise when he's mad. Ronan thinks it's sweet, the way he leashes himself so tightly so none of that anger spills out onto anyone else. "Ronan," he says.

Just his name.

Steve was the first person to use that name in three years. In the lab, he was *Thirteen*. When Steve found him, Ronan gave him his name, and Steve's been giving it back ever since.

"There's a chance I can fix this," Ronan says, "and you never have to know why I'm here."

Steve looks away. He's holding that fork like he's going to stab someone with it, but Ronan's not sure Steve could hurt anything with a human face. "Okay," he says. And then again, stronger, barbed

somehow: "Okay, sure."

"I had a Dream back in Boston," Ronan says.

"A dream?" Steve asks. "Or did you—a *Dream*?"

Ronan never knows how to talk about it. He spent years in the lab pretending it wasn't real. Years, lying through his teeth. He'd chew on his own tongue and lips when they drugged him, try to make his whole mouth clumsy and swollen and bloody, so he wouldn't give them anything, no matter how out of it he was.

Even now, even here, it feels dangerous.

But if he can't trust Steve, then there's no one.

"Something's happening here," Ronan says. "So I came back."

Steve stares at him. "Why didn't you—just call, Ronan. You should've just *called us*. You shouldn't be here."

"I'm not sleeping," Ronan says. He can't help the way he's immediately defensive. He spent so long with his back against the wall that he can feel it there, all the time. The only way out is through. The only way forward for Ronan is straight through everyone else.

"Great," Steve says. He runs a hand down his face. He hasn't eaten anything. "How long have you been awake?"

Since he got here, more or less. He slept in a hotel thirty miles outside of Hawkins the night before Halloween. He thinks he dozed in the car for about fifteen minutes last night, but sometimes it's difficult to tell.

In Hawkins, he's so close to the border that it's membrane-thin. He doesn't have to be asleep to Dream.

"Ronan," Steve says. He's frustrated. Getting angrier. Ronan's naturally inclined to feed any fires he finds, but he's better than his nature.

Sometimes. *Sometimes*, he's better than his nature.

"It gets worse when you don't sleep," Steve says. "That's what you said. You said, in the Lab, they'd keep you up until you couldn't help it."

He told Steve more than he meant to. Well, Steve was the first person he'd talked to in years who didn't want something from him. Ronan's defenses only worked when they had something to push against.

"It's just a couple of days," Ronan says. He knows exactly how many hours he can stay up before he starts to go under. They did extensive tests.

It's not as bad as it was back then. He has cigarettes and coffee. He can fill a bathtub full of ice water and climb in, let the cold shock some adrenaline into his system. He can drive around, find distractions, find a bar, find a fight. There are so many ways to stay aware of where he is.

"You want me to stay home?" Steve asks. "I can stay home, and you can sleep."

Of course he does. Of course he wants that. Sprawled out on the couch, head on Steve's thigh, safely sleeping while Steve watches daytime soap operas on mute.

But it's like being drunk. It'll hurt more when it goes away. And he can't afford to waste time sleeping when he has to figure out what's happening in this town.

Outside of Hawkins, he's fine as long as he's awake. But in Hawkins, he's just a doorway, and he can only hold the door for so long. There's a monster nesting over the Byers house. At some point, it's going to make a move.

"You should go to school," Ronan says.

Steve stands up so fast he almost knocks his chair over. "Fine," he says.

Ronan doesn't even know how to have this kind of fight. He's not

sure what's happening. Steve's angry, and he's retreating, and Ronan can't seem to catch up with him long enough to have any fight at all.

Steve is standing over the trash can, mechanically scrapping his pancakes into the garbage. Ronan wishes he'd throw the damn plate against the wall.

He's upset about Nancy, probably.

Or maybe it's just that, the last time Ronan showed up, he brought monsters with him.

"If you don't want me here," Ronan says, "I can get a hotel room, or--"

Steve fumbles his plate, and it clatters into the sink. "What are you talking about?"

"It's not like I'm good news." Ronan gestures at himself, tries to encompass everything he means, every kind of omen he is. "I know that."

"Yeah, you're my friend." The anger's wearing thin, and now Ronan can see, beneath that, there's just misery. "I'm not chasing you away."

And it's funny, the way he says it. Anger might be Ronan's specialty, but he's always going to know bitterness when he finds it.

It's a strange situation. Feels delicate. Ronan has no business touching any delicate thing.

"Okay," he says. "Then I guess I'm not leaving."

Steve's nod is a robotic jerk of his head, up and down, chin jutting out. His eyes cut away. He looks like he wants something, like he's waiting. His hands twist, a strange, kinetic fidget.

"Steve," Ronan says, slow and appraising, half a question.

"I gotta go," Steve says. "To school. Thanks for breakfast."

He grabs his keys off the hook and dashes for the door.

3. Chapter 3

Ronan shows up on Joyce Byers' doorstep like a bad dream that won't break, stares at his boots on her doormat for several long seconds before he can make himself lift his hand and knock. It's not his fault, he thinks. Not his fault any way you track it, except for the actual, literal truth.

He doesn't know for sure that he's the reason Will ended up in the Upside Down. He doesn't *know* that his presence in Hawkins weakened the borders between There and Here. He doesn't know that Eleven never would've gone walking if he hadn't shown the scientists the path.

He doesn't know that he makes things worse. Hell, for all he knows, maybe Hawkins makes *him* worse. Maybe he's a symptom, not a cause.

But the thread of him is weaved in and out of the timeline too much for him to be insignificant. He's not solely responsible for what happened to her boy, but that doesn't mean he wasn't the catalyst.

When the door swings open and Joyce sees who's standing at her door, she looks at him like she's scared of him. But it only lasts for a second, and then she's got a hand on his shoulder, and she's dragging him into a hug.

He doesn't usually let people touch him, but what's he going to do? Shove Joyce Byers away? Her hands are too gentle to be a threat, and, anyway, she must tell from the way he stiffens up that he hates it. She doesn't hold him long.

"Ronan!" she says, pulling away, studying his face. "Jonathan said you were back. How are you? Are you okay? Is— is everything okay?"

Ronan ducks away from her stare, moves farther into her house. He timed his visit for late enough in the morning that the Byers boys shouldn't be home, but he clatters around anyway, checks to see if any unfortunate bowlcuts make an appearance.

“Will and Jonathan at school?” he asks, when Joyce follows him into the kitchen.

He should be more delicate with her, but he doesn’t know how. He had better manners when he was younger. He can remember the shape of them, if he tries, which he usually doesn’t. *Hi, Ms. Byers. How’re you? Do you have a minute? Can I come in?*

He thinks about words like that coming out of his mouth now, and it’s a Goddamn farce. Lipstick on a pig. He’s just walking bad news for Joyce Byers. No reason to misrepresent himself.

“Well, it’s a school day.” She says it gently, like she thinks Ronan might be embarrassed by the fact that he hasn’t been in a classroom since two men in suits walked into his private boarding school when he was fourteen and walked back out with him between them. Back then, he was too stupid and too young and too accustomed to the armor of wealth to know he was in danger.

Where would any of them be now if he’d been smart enough to run as soon as he realized there were no doorhandles in the backseat of that car?

Anyway, Ronan doesn’t give a shit about school. And, if he did, what would it matter? He can’t enroll. He has no birth certificate, no address, no parents.

“Has Will been weird lately?” Ronan asks. He shoves his hands in his pockets. He tries to think of how Steve would say these things, if Steve had to say them.

Joyce’s hands are shaking. Not bad. Just a little. When she sees him staring, she goes to the counter, picks up a pack of Camels. “He’s been having episodes,” she says.

Yeah, Ronan bets he has. His eyes roam up to the ceiling, and he wonders if that thing is still crouched over this house, or if it followed Will to school.

“What’s this about, Ronan?” she asks. And her hands might be shaking, but there’s a steady look in her eyes, like all her courage is

packed tight at the heart of her, ready to ramp up and spread like a fire.

After his dad died, his mom checked out, and she never checked back in. Not even when her son disappeared.

When Ronan went home, he went to the library, pulled the newspapers from the week after they took him. If anyone ever reported him missing, it didn't make the paper. No missing posters for him, no search parties.

When Will went missing, Joyce damn near tore into another dimension to get him back.

What would Steve say? he thinks. How would he do this?

"I can see that place, sometimes, when I'm asleep." He watches her light a cigarette, and he wants one of his own, but he left his pack in the car. He was trying to be polite.

"Yes," she says. She nods, those giant Bambi eyes of hers wide and intense. "You went looking for El, after what happened the school."

"Yeah." He doesn't tell her about any of the rest of it. He doesn't tell her that he's a door with shitty locks that he had to build himself, that he built them *from* himself. He doesn't tell her it's a risk to everyone, him being back in this town.

He likes the way she looks at him, like she thinks he's here to help. He's a selfish shithead and a bad omen, and he's not sure he's ever made a damn thing better for anyone he's ever met, and he knows that, but he doesn't want her to look at him like she knows it, too.

"Is that why you're here?" she asks. "Because you saw something? Something to do with Will?"

For a moment, all he wants is to give her good news. *Will's going to be fine. There's something wrong in Hawkins, but it'll be okay. It won't get worse. It won't take your son. I can help you. I **will** help you.*

But, whatever else he is, he's not a liar. And, if there's a mother who wants to fight for son, he's sure as hell not going to tell her to stand

down.

They took Ronan so quietly it was like he was never there at all. But Will's a good kid, and he deserves better.

"There's some shit over there, and it wants to get over here," he says. "And I think it's gonna try to get here through Will."

- - -

Max is at the arcade being thirteen and pathetic, and Billy doesn't want to see Mike, doesn't want to see Stacy. But he doesn't want to go home, either. Not with Max out and Susan out and his dad, alone, just waiting at home.

An audience doesn't stop things, but it changes the parameters. Without Susan, without Max, home isn't really a place Billy wants to be.

He drives around Hawkins, feeling like a Doberman in a cat carrier, chasing his tail in the too-small space, so bored he wants to unhinge his jaw and swallow the town whole.

He'd hate this place, if it were worth his time. Mostly, he's too damn bored in this town to feel any way about it at all.

He sees it in his peripheral vision – a basketball court in a park, two figures moving fast – and he damn near takes out a trash can skidding into the lot.

He doesn't realize until he's jogging up that it's Harrington and his delivery boy.

It's perfect. It's exactly what he didn't know he wanted. He couldn't keep the smile off his face if his dad were watching.

"Is this a couples' game?" he asks, when they turn to stare. He left his jacket in the car. He drops his shirt on the ground, stretches his arms.

Steve looks irritated; Ronan just looks interested.

"It's a team sport, Hargrove," Steve says, long-suffering. "I've been trying to explain that to you. You kinda need even teams, you know?"

Billy rolls his eyes. "Jesus, Harrington, you see any refs around? I can take you both."

Ronan makes a strangled noise. Not a laugh, but almost. "I bet you can," he says.

Billy tips his head to the side, considers him. "Why don't I ever see you at school?"

"Because I'm dead," Ronan says.

"No," Steve says, and he puts the back of his hand on Ronan's chest, like Ronan's something he'll have to hold back. "We're not looking for a pickup game, Hargrove. We're good here."

Billy steals the ball right out of his hand. It's easy. It's almost like Steve lets him do it.

"Hargrove," Steve says. And then, "*Billy*. Come on. Just--"

"So take it back," Billy says, one hand out like an invitation, the other dribbling.

So Ronan does. Sidesteps fast around Steve and comes right for him, shoulders into him like Billy doesn't know that trick, like he didn't *invent* that trick in this town. And when that doesn't work, he hooks his foot behind Billy's ankle, pulls back, sends him sprawling.

Billy's up in a heartbeat. He never stays down. He's learned. *On your feet. On your **Goddamn** feet.*

"Aw, Christ," Harrington says.

"So take it back," Ronan says. And that is *definitely* an invitation.

Billy lowers his chin, shoves his shoulder into Ronan's, and slaps the

ball out of his hand.

It's never quite a fistfight, never exactly a wrestling match. Not right up until the end, when Ronan jumps up for a layup and Billy grabs him by the waist and hauls him back to earth instead of going after the ball. And then it is just a fight, just the two of them rolling around on the ground, scraping knees, losing skin, shoving and elbowing but not quite throwing punches.

"Guys," Harrington says, but Billy, for once, isn't paying attention. For once, he can know Steve's in the area without being compelled to seek him out, to look at him, to *watch* him.

"Guys," Harrington says, even louder, and the basketball *thumps* off of Ronan's ribs, whacks into Billy's arms, rolls away.

A few seconds later, the ball hits the backboard and then sinks through the hoop, and maybe that's the only thing in the world that could've broken the spell of Ronan's sweat-soaked shirt and strong grip and vicious elbows. It's Steve Harrington, standing at the three-point line, scoring while they're just scrapping in the dirt.

"Fuck that," Billy says, and shoves himself free. "He's *winning*."

Ronan looks up at him. He's biting back a smile, white teeth pressing into his lip. His shirt is rucked halfway up his ribs. "Is he?"

And, Jesus, Billy has no idea. He feels cold, suddenly, on all the parts of him that were pressed against Ronan. He's transfixed by that stretch of skin, the swells and dips of his abs, the dark scrawl of the tattoo on his back reaching up his sides. "Get up," he says, and he nudges Ronan's bare side with the toe of his boot.

Ronan raises an eyebrow and then holds up his hand, and Billy takes it without thinking, hauls Ronan up, all six foot something of him, all those muscles, all that heat and sweat and blood.

Steve sinks another three pointer.

"Motherfucker," Billy says. "He's winning, I told you."

Ronan shrugs. "You get used to it," he says. But he doesn't sound like

someone who lost a single damn thing.

- - -

Billy hangs around the court for a full hour, until Steve finally gives up, takes the ball, and walks to his car. He thinks for a second that Ronan isn't going to follow, and it makes him want to throw the basketball through his own windshield and maybe cause a bit of a scene.

Nancy called him and them and everything they had bullshit less than twenty-four hours ago. He's sensitive to rejection to right now.

Maybe he's always sensitive to rejection.

But Ronan lopes over when Steve reaches the car, grinning sharp and pleased about something. Steve watches Billy watch Ronan jog away. He doesn't know why it makes him feel the way it does, like he's angry and hot and also going to throw up on his shoes.

He's never wanted anything to do with Billy Hargrove, never had time for the rivalry Billy wanted to build. By the time Billy showed up looking to steal his crown, Steve had already abdicated the throne.

But Billy's eyes are locked on Ronan as Ronan yanks the car door open, and Steve knows that feeling in his chest like a hand closing into a fist is jealousy, but he can't for the life of him figure out who he's jealous of or why.

Billy finally looks his way after Ronan slams the door shut. Their eyes meet over the top of the Beamer, and Steve's never, ever had to wait for Billy's attention before.

Sometimes it feels like Billy Hargrove's the only person who chases Steve while Steve's busy running after the whole rest of the world.

Maybe some strange, sad part of him doesn't want to lose whatever it

is that makes Billy fixate on him.

“You want something, Harrington?” Billy calls. He’s still shirtless, sweaty from their game. His hair is wet at the roots. There’s a stubborn curl falling across his forehead. Steve looks at Billy’s stupid earring and thinks, for no reason at all, about the taste of metal on his tongue.

He gets in the car without saying a damn thing, slams the door shut so hard that it makes Ronan laugh, low and throaty, pleased. “I hate that guy,” Steve says.

“Sure,” Ronan says. Not like he doesn’t believe him, but like he doesn’t think it’s important. Like, somehow, it’s not relevant.

“Did you have to invite him to stay?” Steve asks.

Ronan grins, sprawled out in the passenger seat, sweat making his thin white shirt stick to his skin. “Is that what I did?”

“I hate him,” Steve says. “He’s an asshole.”

“Okay.” Ronan doesn’t seem to care, but he leans over a little, smile twisting at the corners. “You want me to fight him for you?”

There’s something off about the way Ronan says *fight*. Something almost dirty. It’s probably just how eager Ronan sounds.

“No,” Steve says. He pulls out of the parking lot, speeds down the road. He’s a fairly cautious driver, but he wants as much space between Ronan and Billy Hargrove as possible.

He doesn’t want Ronan to *fight* him. He doesn’t want Ronan near him at all.

He wants Ronan to stay. He wants Ronan with him. He wants Ronan to cook another of Steve’s grandma’s recipes and spend the night on the couch watching *Jeopardy* and aggressively answering half the questions wrong and then debating his point, shoulder-to-shoulder with Steve, swearing angrily at the host. He wants Ronan to stay until Steve falls asleep that way, head on Ronan’s shoulder, every light on.

But they're home for an hour before the radio crackles to life, and it's Ronan's, not Steve's. And it's Nancy, asking Ronan, not to Steve, to meet her at her place.

"I want to talk about something," she says. Steve's chewing through his garlicky green beans, staring blankly at the wooden swirls of the table.

"Okay," Ronan says. "Be there in fifteen minutes."

Steve takes his plate to the kitchen, scraps everything that's left into the trash. He feels angry and unsteady, a tornado swirling up to speed. He goes upstairs and pulls his door shut before any of that violence leaks out.

- - -

Ronan parks five houses away from the Wheelers' and waits in the dark until Nancy appears. She swings into place behind him without saying anything, but her forehead thumps into his shoulder with a heaviness that feels like a confession. He drives away before anyone spots Nancy Wheeler on the back of a motorcycle and calls the cops.

He really doesn't want to explain to Jim Hopper what he's doing with Steve Harrington's girl, alone together after dark.

They go into the woods, because everyone in this town is some kind of a masochist, and Nancy likes to take out the things that hurt her and look at them like she's a doctor extracting bullet fragments from old gunfight wounds. Except a doctor would probably get to work healing instead of measuring everything out and then sticking it all back under her skin to fester.

Mostly, she wants to pour vodka on the tree that was once a portal and then try to set it on fire.

"Lighter fluid would work better," Ronan tells her. There are still scorch marks on this tree from the last time they tried this. They

never learn, but, then, they never try.

“Can’t drink lighter fluid,” she says, as she takes an ambitious gulp straight from the bottle. She makes a face at the taste, but then she smiles, and she’s beautiful again.

Sometimes, Ronan thinks he should make himself more palatable, the way Nancy does. Maybe it’d be nice. People hand Nancy anything she wants. But they also give her endless piles of shit she hates. People have to learn to take her seriously.

Hell, she had to learn to take *herself* seriously. Ronan was there. He remembers. Her softness is a thing she eats, piece by piece.

“I’m sorry about Steve,” she tells him. She’s not looking at him. She’s looking at Ronan’s lighter in her hand, at the way the flame licks at the bark but won’t catch.

It’s too wet here. It’s fucking November. They should’ve burned this place in July.

But Ronan wasn’t here in July.

“You should stop screwing him around,” Ronan tells her.

She flicks the lighter shut and looks up at him. “I’m not screwing him around.”

“Okay,” Ronan says. “Stop screwing yourself around.”

Her pretty mouth moues up mean. Ronan thinks, if girls did anything for him, Nancy Wheeler glaring like she was about to rip his throat out with her teeth would make his heart skip in his chest. As it is, it just makes him smile.

“I’m going to tell people,” she says. “About Barb. About what happened. I’m going to get proof, and I’m going to tell her parents.”

He takes the vodka away from her. She poured half the bottle on the tree, and now there’s not enough left for him. “What kind of proof?” he asks.

He is proof. He's probably not what she means.

"Jonathan and I," she says, "we're going to try to record them. We're going to get them to say something we can use."

He almost chokes on the vodka. "*Why*, Nancy?"

"Because her parents are selling their house to pay a private investigator, Ronan." She stands up, takes the bottle back. "Because they deserve to know. Because *everyone* deserves to know. Because it fucking *happened*."

Ronan looks at the tree that took Nancy to the Upside Down. At the scorch marks, the patches of twisted bark. All their rage, and it's just superficial damage.

"At least break up with Steve before you go get yourself blackbaggged and Barb'd into oblivion," Ronan says.

Nancy looks like she's about to slap him. "Why? Want to make sure I'm out of your way?"

Hell, he probably would've preferred if she *had* slapped him. "There is no way, Nancy," Ronan says. "You get them both. You get anyone you want. Congratulations. Go fuck yourself."

And now Nancy just looks like she pities him, which is worse. "You're an idiot, Ronan."

Sure, but at least he knows when to walk away from a fight where the only prize is telling a sad couple that their little girl died scared and alone and in pieces.

"Nancy Wheeler," he says, half-mocking, half-admiring, "crusader for truth and justice."

"Fuck you," she says. She pauses, and her hand looks so delicate around that bottle, but she's five bad seconds away from smashing it against the ground and using it to stab a monster in the throat. "If I don't come back--"

"If you don't come back," Ronan says, "I'll burn that fucking lab to

the ground.”

She nods. She doesn’t ask him to go after her. Maybe she knows better. Probably she knows better.

“And this tree,” she says, knocking the bottle against the bark.

“And that tree,” Ronan promises.

- - -

Jim’s smoking on the front porch when Ronan shows up. He’s on foot, hands shoved into the pockets of his leather jacket, picking his way carefully over the tripwires and traps. Jim flicks the cigarette into the dirt as Ronan comes to a stop, eyes tracing over the broken glass, the destruction.

“Did she bring you here?” he asks.

Even now, after months of this, he still doesn’t know what all she can do. And he has no fucking clue about the limits of Ronan’s abilities. The two of them could be talking right now, for all he knows. Passing thoughts back and forth in silence.

Ronan shakes his head and then shrugs. “Not really how it works,” he says. And then, with a rueful twist of his mouth. “Not how *she* works.”

And no, it wouldn’t be. El might have the power to make people do things, but she hasn’t shown the inclination.

“Well, she’s had kind of an eventful evening,” he says. “So I didn’t know.”

He doesn’t know what the hell he’s going to do about all those windows. It’s not like it’ll be easy, getting all that replacement glass out here. And, anyway, how’s he going to source it? Drive three towns over? How’s he going to explain this?

Hiding a child from the government is difficult enough. Hiding the aftermath of a telepath's tantrum is exactly the kind of complicated Jim doesn't need right now.

Ronan hops up onto the porch rather than coming near the stairs Jim's sitting on. He takes a seat on the railing, as far from Jim as he can get while still technically occupying the same porch. Jim would take that positioning personally, but he knows Ronan well enough to know there's no point.

He's like a cat. If he puts himself within grabbing distance, it's a declaration of trust. And with someone like Ronan, trust is built up from a deficit. Jim figures he could pay in for years without breaking even.

"I kinda," Ronan says, and then waves his hand up near his head. It's a vague gesture, and he doesn't look at Jim when he makes it. "Felt weird. About half an hour ago."

Jim snorts and thinks about lighting another cigarette. Half an hour ago, El shattered every window in the cabin. "Yeah, I'll bet you did."

Ronan eyes him, direct and assessing. "She okay?"

And Jim has no idea. "How could she be? Look at this shit, Ronan. I've had her locked in a cabin for damn near a year. She doesn't see anyone. She never goes anywhere. She snuck out today, and I don't—what if they find her? What are they going to do to her?"

Ronan's eyebrows pull together. His hands are curled around the railing. "You really asking?"

If anyone would know, it's him. From what El's said, Ronan had it worse than she did, in the Lab. But Ronan's always seemed to think the opposite. Jim knows what guilt looks like, and it's all over Ronan's face, every time looks at her.

Jim thinks, if Ronan had it worse, it's because he chose that over whatever it was that El thought was *better*.

"I'd like a clear picture of what we're up against," he says. "Of what the stakes are."

Ronan tips his head back. He thinks that over for a moment, eyes tracking the stars through the trees, and then he looks back at Jim. “No, you wouldn’t.”

It surprises a laugh out of him. “Kid,” he says, “whatever it is—”

“*Whatever* it is,” Ronan repeats, tone so heavy with derision it’s a wonder he can lift the words past his teeth.

Jim’s not interested in two psychic tantrums in one hour. Hell, he’s not even sure what that would *look* like with Ronan. El breaks things, and, at her worst, she could break bodies, but Ronan’s an unknown variable. Ronan doesn’t break; he creates. He transfers.

If Ronan wanted to hurt someone, he could reach into another dimension and bring back monsters.

“You’re not gonna shock me,” Jim says. “That’s all I mean.”

Not after all of this. Not after the Lab. Not after the war. Not after ten years as a cop, living with the worst things people do to each other.

“Sorry, Chief,” Ronan says, with a shitty, *fight me* smile. “Come back with a warrant.”

“Son of a bitch,” Jim says. “Why’s everything gotta be difficult with you? Aren’t you here to help? *Help*, for Christ’s sake.”

Ronan’s boots hit the porch with a heavy *thump*. “I’m here to help *her*,” he says, and then he yanks the cabin door open and slams it shut behind him.

With the windows broken, Jim can hear him clearly. The tread of his boots over broken glass, the up-tempo knock on her door.

“Hey, kid,” Ronan says. “You okay in there?”

There’s a long stretch of silence and then some clattering and a soft series of knocks. “Okay,” El says.

She sounds like she’s been crying.

Jim did that. Broke his promise. Didn't come home. Yelled at her.

Jesus Christ, he yelled at a kid who's never had parents, never had any adult she could trust.

"You wanna come out?" Ronan says. "It's just me in here."

"No," she says, after another, longer pause. And she must be really miserable in there, if she doesn't even want to see Ronan.

"Okay." There's a scuffling sound, a settling. "Well, I'll be out here for a while, if you change your mind."

Jim smokes three cigarettes and starts to lose dexterity in his fingers and toes, but Eleven never opens the door. Eventually, Ronan comes back outside. Jim expects judgment in his eyes, but there's just a bleary kind of commiseration that makes Jim wonder when he last slept.

"There's something going on with the Lab," he says, when Ronan clambers down from the porch, still giving him a wide berth. "It's the epicenter of something."

Ronan's lips pull back over his teeth, more snarl than smile. He's staring up at the sky again. "Sure is," he agrees.

"Ronan," Jim says, "what the hell are you doing here?"

"The best I can, Chief," he says. "Let her know, if she wants to talk to me, I'm around." And then he throws Jim a mocking salute and sets off into the darkness, side-stepping over the tripwires as he goes.

- - -

He's making a spectacle out of himself, probably. Which is fine, so long as no one's around to witness, but that illusion of safety is shattered when a single headlight illuminates the inside of the Camaro, and Ronan catches him parked outside Steve Harrington's

house two days in a row.

Billy grabs his cigarettes off the dashboard, fumbles for his lighter.

But no one's going to believe he stopped to smoke and then turned the car off and just sat here, windows up, unmoving.

"Hey." Ronan knocks his knuckles against Billy's passenger window. "Are you jacking off in there? Let me in. I'm gonna freeze my balls off out here."

Billy thinks about driving away, but he feels caught. He feels *watched*. He feels like he needs to frame this in a way that's not going to look like exactly what it is. So he reaches over to unlock the door, pulls the handle, shoves it open.

"You're the one driving a bike in November in Indiana," Billy says. "What the fuck did you expect?"

Ronan maneuvers his way into the Camaro, bullies the seat back so his legs aren't shoved up to his chest. "Don't like being caged in," he says, as he's fighting with the seat, fighting with the implausibility of contorting his body into this limited space.

"You're gonna get frostbite," Billy tells him. "Lose your ears."

Ronan shrugs. He seems to give up on being comfortable, heaves himself back against the seat with a heavy, beleaguered sigh. "Acceptable loss. No one says anything worth hearing anyway."

Billy laughs. "Shit," he says, more charmed than he should be. Ronan can't seem to go thirty seconds without taking a swing at the whole world, and maybe Billy admires the instinct. "What about music?"

Ronan hesitates. He's been fussing with a tear in his jeans, wrapping the loose threads around his fingers and pulling, but he goes completely still for a second. When he blinks, the lights from Steve's driveway make his eyelashes look impossibly long, shadows shading across his cheekbones, softening the sharp lines.

"Okay," he says, a begrudging concession. "Music, yeah. Sure. I'd miss music."

Billy nods, feeling disproportionately triumphant, and drums his fingers on the steering wheel, tries to decide if it'd be weird if he asked Ronan what he listens to.

"You like that punk bullshit," Billy says, because statements are safer than questions, easier to control.

Ronan snorts something too derisive to be a laugh and looks over at him, head canted back against the headrest, eyebrows a combative line. "That punk bullshit," he repeats, eyes heavy-lidded and focused.

"I've seen your shirts," Billy says. "You gonna tell me they're not yours? I'd ask if they were your boyfriend's, but I know Harrington's got shittier taste than that."

"Don't run your mouth about Steve," Ronan says, immediately. Like testing an electric fence. *Put your hands here, and you'll get shocked. Say something about Steve, and you'll get pushed back.*

"Or what?" Billy asks. Parameter check. He's just curious about the stakes.

Ronan shrugs. "Or I'm gonna get frostbite and lose my ears when I drag you out of this car and we fight about it."

It'll be ugly, Billy thinks. When it happens. It feels inevitable. Of course they're going to fight. Eventually.

He's more heavily muscled than Ronan is, but Ronan's at least four inches taller, and everything about him says he'll fight mean. He's so snakelike that sometimes it's a shock to see perfectly normal teeth in his mouth.

"Where are you even from?" Billy asks. He's pretty sure he asked before and got no answer, but maybe, with Ronan, everything's a war of attrition, and the trick is to just keep pushing. Billy's got a knack for pushing until something breaks.

"Virginia," Ronan says, after a long pause where he seems to consider just punching Billy in the face instead of answering the question. "I'm mostly in Boston now."

“Mostly?” Billy asks. He eyes Ronan, but, honestly, he could be seventeen or twenty-five. “Your parents move around a lot?”

“Dad doesn’t move much at all these days,” Ronan says, like it’s a joke.

Billy narrows his eyes, tries to parse it. He sees something cross Ronan’s face, and he thinks, *Oh. His dad’s dead.*

“I don’t live with my parents,” Ronan says. A little fast. Maybe he gave something away that he meant to keep for himself.

“How old are you?” Billy asks.

Ronan smirks over at him, sudden and sharp. He bats his lashes, and it’s like watching a crocodile blow a kiss. “You asking if I’m jailbait?”

“Jesus,” Billy says, “you just talk to people like that?”

Ronan reaches over, taps his fingers against the bare skin of Billy’s chest, right below his sternum. “You just wear your shirts like that? You got a problem with buttons, Billy? Need someone to help you get dressed in the mornings?”

It’s there, right on the tip of Billy’s tongue. *Are you offering?*

And that’s when Billy realizes how dangerous this is, how dangerous *Ronan* is. Because it feels like something he could say. It feels like, if he did, Ronan would know how to answer. It feels like Billy’s standing in the middle of a flowchart, and he made half his choices without realizing, and now there are only two or three ways forward that don’t lead directly to disaster.

“You always this fucking weird?” Billy asks. *Weird* isn’t what he means.

Ronan’s smile isn’t friendly. He looks at Billy like he knows exactly what Billy wanted to say. “You’re parked outside Steve’s house at damn near midnight, Billy. You bring some pebbles to throw, or were you just gonna sit out here and hope for peeks through the windows?”

That flowchart narrows. Maybe there's only one way out.

"Get out of my car," Billy says.

Ronan's laugh is a mean, soundless thing, less about amusement than it is about baring teeth.

"*Out*," Billy says, and he knows they're going to fight. He can feel it. He doesn't know if it'll be next week, or tomorrow, or five minutes from now, when Ronan won't stop saying things that Billy can't let exist in the world.

"Okay," Ronan says, and then he points up toward the house, toward a window on the second story. "That's Steve's window," he says. "But you probably already knew that, right?"

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Billy says.

"Sure," Ronan says. He shoves the car door open, swings his feet out onto the street. And then, as he's standing up, he points to another window. First story. Right under Steve's. "That one's me," he says. "I don't keep it locked."

"If you don't shut the fuck up--"

Ronan slams the car door shut and moves into the darkness, back toward his bike. He flips Billy off as he goes, and Billy damn near runs him and his stupid motorcycle off the road when he kicks the Camaro to life, roars out of there so fucking loud that there's no chance of him hearing anything else Ronan decides to say.

4. Chapter 4

Steve finds Ronan facedown on the kitchen table, half-empty coffee cup by his elbow, a bag of frozen peas over his knuckles. He's not asleep. His eyes track Steve as he walks in and then, a full two seconds later, he slowly lifts his head. "Hey," he mumbles.

"Fucking," Steve says and then throws his hands up. "What the shit, Ronan?"

"Good morning," Ronan says. Somehow, he possesses the audacity to sound reproachful.

"Oh, yeah," Steve says. "Excuse *me*. Famed etiquette coach, Ronan Lynch. Good *morning*, how are you and your busted knuckles feeling this morning?"

"Like you should invest in a punching bag." Ronan knocks the peas off his hand, flexes his fingers. "Also, I broke something in your garage."

Steve runs a hand through his hair. Ronan's eyes are glassy, unfocused. Steve wants to yell at him, but, more than that, he wants Ronan to be able to look at him like he sees him. "You need to sleep."

Ronan's hand tightens into a fist, and the new scabs stretch across his knuckles. He watches - analytical, distant - as fresh blood wells up.

Steve tries to do the math. Ronan showed up in his kitchen on Halloween. This is the second day of November. At best, assuming Ronan slept at all the night before he showed up in Hawkins, they're sliding past forty-eight hours without sleep. Two full days, two full nights, and here they are again.

"It's not that bad in the daylight," Ronan tells him. His voice is low and buzzing in his throat, sounds like he's been up all night smoking. "Another pot of coffee, I'll be fine."

Steve remembers this roller coaster. The dips and climbs of Ronan's mood, the ebb and flow of his focus. He grabs the phone and holds it

out to Ronan. “C’mere,” he says.

Ronan eyes the phone like it’s going to bite. “Why?”

Steve waves the phone at him. “Because right now you sound like you’ve been smoking a pack a day for forty-five years, and the school secretary knows my voice. So get the fuck over here, and tell her I’m sick and staying home.”

“Skipping class?” Ronan sidewinds out of his chair, and Steve doesn’t like it, never has, how Ronan can start fading out of his own eyes but always moves like he’s ready for anything.

Steve wouldn’t know how to explain it, if he had to. It’s just that it’s hard to hold in his head, the way even Ronan doesn’t seem to care when he’s hurt.

“Skipping class so you’ll *sleep*,” Steve says. He smacks the phone into Ronan’s chest. Ronan lets it tumble to the floor.

“I’m *fine*, Steve,” he says.

“Bullshit,” Steve says. It’s kind of liberating to say. Maybe that’s why Nancy said it so many times. “That’s bullshit, Ronan. Make the call.”

“I refuse,” Ronan says, “to contribute to the delinquency of a—”

“I’ll kick your ass, Ronan, I swear to God.”

Ronan laughs. Mean. Meaner than he gets with Steve. Jesus, he’s really losing it. “Will you?”

Steve shoulders him into the wall and then grabs his wrist, hauls the phone up off the floor by its cord, and pushes it into Ronan’s hand until his fingers curl around the plastic. He keeps Ronan pinned there, using his whole body to hold him, and the back of Ronan’s head rests against the wallpaper, his eyes moving slowly over Steve’s face.

“Make,” Steve says, “the fucking phone call.”

There’s a beat where it could go either way, but then Ronan’s mouth

quirks up fond, and Steve feels the tension melt into something else. "You gonna keep me pinned like this while I do?" Ronan asks, voice somewhere between incredulous and delighted. "Because if you start humping my leg, I'm not sure the school admin team is really prepared for what they're gonna overhear."

Steve rolls his eyes and shoves him one more time before he steps back. "Yeah, you can't scare me off with that, asshole. We held hands while you *slept* once."

"Who says I'm trying to scare you off?" Ronan asks. "Maybe I'm just trying to earn a repeat."

Steve feels himself start to blush, which is just giving Ronan what he wants. For a second, that image blooms bright and dangerous in his mind, and then he shakes his head, and doesn't think about it again. "Yeah, well," he says, stepping away, moving back, "make the call, see what it gets you."

- - -

At first, it's just a nightmare. Could be a memory. He's not sure. They kept him in a white room with white furniture and white walls and white clothes and white socks. No shoes, no shoelaces. Eventually, no sheets. There were things they said he could earn - books and paper and movies - if he acted right, but he never acted right.

The point is: the moments smeared together. Three years, over a thousand days. No windows. Soundproof walls.

He lost his fucking mind in there. He never got all of it back.

So, at first, it's just a nightmare. Just him in the room, waiting.

And then, slowly, it shifts to something else.

He watches the hair on his arms stand up, watches the goosebumps rise over his skin. He tells himself not to fall asleep, but some part of him

knows he already is, and that 's when it changes. That's when he moves from dreaming to Dreaming.

The walls fade, turn partially translucent, and, when he rests his fingers against them, they wave and shift like smoke. He breathes out, and a hole opens that 's wide enough for him to crawl through, so he does.

He's underground. He's in a tunnel.

But it's not a tunnel so much as it's the esophagus of a monster that wants to digest him, a pathway to a place that'll pick him apart, harvest what's useful.

He needs out, so he's out.

He's in the pumpkin patch, and everything's rotting. He's Dreaming.

Steve will wake him up, he thinks. He's pretty sure.

If Steve is real, if any of that was real, if he hasn't been drugged and spaced out and delirious and insane the whole time, if any part of any of it was ever real, then Steve is real, and Steve will wake him up.

He plucks a blade of grass from the ground, and he tugs and bends and wills it into a baseball bat with nails sticking through it. "Steve," he says. "Wake me up."

Steve doesn't hear him. But something else does.

*He can hear it, underground. A shifting, squirming cacophony. There's something down there. There are some **things** down there.*

The bat feels too light in his hands. He built it, but he doesn't believe in it. When he takes these things back to his world, they're real, and they can hold weight. But in the Upside Down, they're all just paper shields. He's too scared to believe in anything over here.

No bat will protect him. No gun. No friends.

They'll eat him alive. He knows they will. They've taken bites out of him before.

"Steve," he says. He can feel him. He can always feel him. Steve and Eleven. And sometimes Hopper or Nancy or Will Byers. And now, for some reason, Billy Hargrove, like the off-key jangling of a missed note, catching his attention from clear across town.

There's something underground, and it wants to get its teeth in him.

"Steve," he says. He tugs at the string between them, but Steve can't feel it. Ronan could pull on that string until he ripped his own heart out, but Steve wouldn't know.

Eleven would. But she feels faraway. Distracted, or distant. He doesn't know if she'd hear him, and, anyway, she can't help him.

He left his body with Steve. And Steve can help him.

"Steve," he says. "Please."

The whole world goes dark, and Ronan looks up. That creature haunting Will Byers is above him, looking down. It's monstrous; it's horrible. It's watching him the way a cat watches a mouse it's found stuck in a trap, back legs broken, body caught, helpless.

It'll take him when it wants to. There's nothing he can do. He's just waiting again, like before. A thousand days, waiting for them to kill him.

*He doesn't know what'll happen. Before, the monsters just wanted to rip him into manageable pieces. This thing seems to want something else. It's **smarter**.*

The last time he got caught by something with a mind, they held him in a white room for three years, and the teeth would've been kinder.

He held out against the scientists, held out against the soldiers. Held out against the drugs and the interrogations and the mind games. They were human. They were stuck in their own skulls, couldn't get into his unless he let them.

This thing doesn't seem to have limits. When its eyes settle on Ronan, he can feel the weight of its awareness press against him, and he thinks it could pop his mind like a bubble, reach in and shake his thoughts like rolling dice.

*It leans toward him, and it speaks in his mind with Will Byers' voice: **He likes it cold.***

Ronan wants to call for Steve again, but he doesn't want to give it Steve's name.

Behind him, beneath him, there are things crawling out of the tunnels, and, when their faces peel apart, they're just rows and rows of teeth.

*Steve, he thinks. **Steve's house, Steve's couch, Steve's hands. I'm Rightside Up. I'm safe.***

*They're circling around him. They aren't hurting him. They're **herding** him. Toward the behemoth crouched over the town.*

But he doesn't want to die that way. If all he has is the choice, he chooses the teeth.

He turns toward the closest one and swings, and the bat isn't real, but he needs it to be, so it is. The monster screams, and its skin rips, and there's ichor spreading down its ripped-open face.

There's a pause, and then one creature leaps onto the wounded one, and it starts to eat.

"Jesus Christ," Ronan says.

*And then it's a fucking bloodbath. He swings his bat, but he doesn't believe in it. The screams are too much, the sounds of teeth tearing flesh. The **smells** .*

He doesn't believe in anything, and the bat disappears, he's sinking into the ground, pulled toward the tunnels, toward the heart, toward the stomach.

He's breathing hard. He's panicking. He grabs at the dirt, but his hands phase through it. Phase and phase and phase and catch.

"Ronan, Ronan. Ronan! Wake the fuck—"

Ronan sits up so fast he headbutts Steve in the face. Steve yelps and flinches back, and Ronan rolls away from him. His fingers are

threaded through Steve's, though, and he's holding on so tight that his grip yanks him back, and he ends up flat on his back on the living room floor, his hand still clinging to Steve's.

"Jesus *fucking* Christ, Steve!" Ronan's skin feels hot, and his eyes are swollen, and he's not sure, but maybe he's crying. "Why the fuck didn't you wake me up?"

"You were fine!" Steve says. "I *did*. You were freaking out for like ten seconds, Ronan, I promise. What the hell happened?"

Ronan tears his hand away from Steve's and scrubs at his face. "I told you," he says. Lower and meaner than he wants to, but he can't help it. His heart is a mad rabbit, running so fast it's gonna burst. "I fucking told you I shouldn't sleep."

"You were out of it. You needed to sleep. *Nothing* happened."

Nothing happened, Ronan thinks. ***Nothing*** happened.

His hands clench into fists, and he wants to hurt something. He wants to hurt *Steve*. There's no reason for it, except it'll make him feel better. Thirty seconds ago, he was helpless, and so now he wants to knock Steve's teeth out of his mouth.

It's shitty. It's pointless. It's cruel.

"Fuck you," Ronan says, and he shoves his way to his feet.

"Okay, so, get in the car," Steve says. "It's worse in Hawkins, right? We'll go somewhere else. We'll go *anywhere* else."

But Ronan was in Boston, and he Dreamed. He can't outrun this. Maybe he never could.

He had eleven months of running. And now here he is.

When Steve shook him awake, Ronan wasn't in control. If any of those things had been touching him, if they'd been eating him, he would've brought them with him. If that monster that lives above the town catches him when he's Dreaming, he'll take it wherever the hell it wants to go.

“Steve,” Ronan says, “you need to stay the fuck away from me.”

Steve stares at him. He looks hurt, and then angry, and then tired of Ronan’s bullshit. “Well, fuck you, Ronan. Because I’m not going to.”

When he moves to stand, Ronan plants his hand on Steve’s chest and shoves him back down. He outweighs him now. Eleven months, and he put on muscle. Out here, no one’s telling Ronan he didn’t earn solid food. Out here, no one’s keeping him on starvation rations for bad behavior.

Out here, he can put Steve wherever the hell he wants him.

“Oh, come on,” Steve says, glaring up at him. He braces his hands on the couch, moves to stand again.

Ronan shoves him back and follows him down, one knee on the couch, one hand braced above Steve’s shoulder and the other flat against Steve’s chest. “I’m not fucking with you Harrington.” He pushes, and Steve lifts his chin, not fighting him, but not impressed. “You need to leave me the fuck alone.”

Steve stares at him. His jaw is set. “I’m not going to.”

And the soldiers at the Lab used to tell him he never learned a damn thing, but they taught him plenty about lost causes and hollow victories. There’s nothing to win here.

He pulls back, drops his hands. Steve watches him go.

He doesn’t say anything when Ronan grabs his wallet, his keys. Doesn’t say anything until Ronan’s all the way to the door.

“I’ll leave the door unlocked,” he calls, as Ronan shoves it open, steps outside, “you stubborn *shithead*.”

- - -

Ronan storms onto Joyce's front yard like he's going to rob the place. "Oh," Joyce says, watching Ronan's approach through the windows. "He's upset."

Upset is a word for it. Jim's encountered friendlier anti-personnel mines.

"I'll talk to him," he says.

Joyce grimaces. "Oh, Hopp, I'm not sure—"

But he's already at her door. "It's fine, Joyce. Just let me know if Will draws anything you recognize."

The door rattles in the frame with the force of Ronan's knock, and Joyce flinches, almost imperceptibly. It's just a slight tensing around the eyes, but it's enough to have Jim yanking the door open with more force than necessary and pulling it shut behind him when he shoulders Ronan back onto the porch.

"Fuck," Ronan says, and he's flinching, too, but his flinches always look like he's winding up to throw a punch. "Jesus, Hopper, your cop is showing. You don't have to exit every door like you're raiding the place."

Last night, Ronan had been tightly wound, but he's unspooling now. Seems angry, unsteady. He shifts to the side, moves to flank Jim to get to the door. And Jim's not even sure Ronan wants in that bad, but it seems like he can tell that he's being told no, and his only reaction to that is *fuck you, stop me*.

"You're not going in there until you calm down," Jim says. He reaches back, braces a hand against the frame, bars the way.

Ronan's eyebrows pull together. He ducks his chin, sets his shoulders.

"We are *not*," Jim says, loud, "gonna have a fist fight at ten in the morning because you woke up agitated, Ronan."

Something happens behind Ronan's eyes at the words *woke up*, and he doesn't swing, but he feints, swings open-handed like there's a chance in hell that Jim's going to believe, if Ronan Lynch wanted to

hit him, he'd go for a slow open slap to the face instead of a fast hook to the throat.

"Okay," Jim says, and he ducks under the open hand, grabs Ronan around the waist, hauls him down the stairs, and heaves him backwards onto Joyce's patchy, unraked yard.

Ronan barely touches the ground before he's back on his feet, and now he really *will* swing. Now there's rage on his face and nothing else. Jim flipped a switch. He wasn't thinking.

"Hey," he says, hands up, "kid, it's fine. Just take a breath."

"Fuck you," he says, and he rose up from the dirt with a rock in his hand, like that's the kind of fight they're having, in his head. Like he thinks he's going to need it.

This is the problem Jim has with Ronan. This is why he can't ever figure out how to talk to him. Because Ronan carries himself like he's twenty-five with a shitty attitude, like he's untouchable, like he thinks Jim's in over his head in choppy water and he only barely deigns to throw a life preserver.

But he's a kid. He's just a kid. And, sometimes, he gets scared, and the only thing he's learned to do with that is fight his way through it.

"Ronan," Jim says, and Ronan blinks. Like he expected Jim to call him something else. A number, maybe. "Jesus, kid, where's your head at right now?"

Ronan takes a breath, clenches his jaw. He's on the edge of something. Whatever's waiting for him on the other side isn't good.

"*Ronan*," Jim says again. Intentionally, enunciating. "Where are you?"

Ronan goes reptilian still, reboots right there in Joyce Byers' front yard. When his eyes move from Jim's hands to his face, he finally seems to know him. A beat after that, his whole face flames red, and he drops the rock back to the dirt. "Fucking Christ, Hopper," he says, "don't fucking manhandle me like that."

Jim keeps his hands up, fingers spread, palms out. Ronan's focus keeps tracking to them. There's a weird, hunted animal wariness to him that's making Jim itch inside his own skin. He's seeing his hands through Ronan's eyes, and he doesn't like how they look, doesn't like what they could do.

"I'm sorry," he says. "You showed up here like a bulldog, Ronan. I didn't want you to bite anyone."

Ronan hisses a breath through his teeth. He shakes his hands out, but the tension doesn't leave his face. "Will's here, right?" he says. "He's doing something. I need to talk to him."

Jim thinks about Will, in there, checked out, drawing and drawing and communicating nothing.

"If I let you in there," he says, "are you gonna lose it again? It's a bit of a delicate situation."

Ronan sneers at him. Jim guesses that's what he gets for asking anyone in the world to predict when Ronan's temper is going to fray.

"The situation," Ronan says, "is fucked."

"Yeah," Jim says, because, sure, fine. Granted. "And are you gonna make it worse, or better?"

"I never fucking make anything better, Hopper," he says. Too loud and brittle, raw.

Ronan has all this armor, these tectonic plates of anger. Below that, there's just the magma he's made out of himself, that person he melted down.

He's about the same age as the kids Jim deployed with. So it's not so strange, really, the way he sometimes reminds him of them.

"Okay," Jim says. He knocks a cigarette out of his pack, holds it out with his lighter. "Well, take a minute, get yourself together, and then we'll go in there, and you'll try, okay?"

"Fuck you," Ronan tells him, but he takes the cigarette, takes the

lighter. For a second, his hands are shaking too much to hold the flame steady, but then he looks at them, and they stop, dead still and capable. He breathes in, teeth bared, and then he breathes out.

Jim stands next to him, closer than Ronan usually lets him get. He puts his hands in his pockets, sees the way Ronan clocks that, the way his face twists up like he's mad at himself for noticing.

"Okay," Ronan says, minutes later, when the cigarette's dead, and he's grinding it into the dirt. "Okay, Hopp, I'll go *try*."

- - -

Whatever's in Will Byers isn't coming out without leverage. Or an exorcism. "I could," Ronan says, afterwards, when he's in the kitchen with Joyce and Hopper, trying to keep his voice even and sane. "*Try*," he says. "I could try. Going in. Seeing what he looks like from that side of things."

He's thinking about teeth. He's thinking about blood on white walls.

He's thinking that Will's a good kid, but so was Ronan, once, and maybe they aren't doorways so much as they're conduits.

He's thinking about plague ships. About cancer. About quarantine, cauterization.

"Is it safe?" Joyce asks.

"No," Ronan says.

Hopper tips his head to the side. He's developed the sudden, humiliating habit of keeping his arms crossed, hands tucked into his armpits. Ronan can't look at him when he's doing that because it makes him want to scream.

"Who's it dangerous for?" Hopper asks. "You, or him? Or both?"

Ronan hesitates. His teeth bite into the side of his mouth, an old strategy and a counterproductive one. Still comforting, though. He gnaws just for a second, doesn't bite hard enough to draw blood. "It's using Will for something. An anchor, a doorway, maybe. I don't know."

They didn't use to be this *smart*. Maybe all the noise, all the churn drew a higher class of monster. Or maybe it created one.

Joyce is pale. She's getting that frantic bug-eyed look about her that Ronan remembers from last year. Like her cupped hands are full of her kid's blood, and she'll lose him if the drops run out. "Can you help him?"

He's not so sure there's any helping Will Byers. If he were a better person, maybe he could look Joyce in the face and tell her the truth.

"If he's the—you know." Hopper makes a gesture like he'd wave his hands, if they weren't safely tucked away. "The host, or whatever. If that's what he is, and you go over there, what's to stop it from doing the same thing to you?"

Ronan concentrates on the teeth in his mouth, on the way they stay locked together.

After a long moment, Joyce and Hopper look at each other and then at Ronan. "Will can't do what you can do," Hopper says. "The last thing I want is this thing getting you."

Because Ronan's *dangerous*. Because he always has been. "If it gets bad," he says, forcing his teeth apart, shoving the words out of his stubborn throat, barreling through the cowardice that wants him to stay Here, stay awake, stay as safe as he ever gets. "If it gets bad—"

"If it gets bad," Hopper says, "it can sure as hell get worse."

"We can figure this out," Joyce says. "There has to be a way to help him."

So they go back to Will, but, this time, he stops drawing the second Ronan walks into the room. He lifts his head and stares, eyes locked on Ronan's face, and he stares and stares, doesn't blink. The

membrane between There and Here stretches filament-thin, and Ronan can see straight through the backs of Will's eyes into the eyes of something else, something huge and hungry and *burrowing*.

"Ronan," Joyce says, soft and careful. Her hand reaches out to curl around Ronan's shoulder, and, when she guides him two steps to the left, Will's head swivels, cat-like, to follow. "I'm not sure you should be here right now."

"Motherfucker," Ronan says, which is usually the kind of language he tries not to use in front of Joyce Byers. But that thing is looking at him, and he wants it to hear him, too. "This is an eviction notice."

"Ronan," Hopper says. Not soft, not careful. But his hands are in his pockets, and Ronan hits his threshold, finds his feet moving before his brain catches up.

"I have that radio," he says, as he heads for the door. Behind him, he hears Will's fingers scrambling across the table as he leans forward to watch him leave. "If you need me."

But he doesn't know what they could possibly need from him. There's no move he can make that won't make everything worse.

His hands shake until he looks at them and then they go still. The wheels of his bike kick up the dirt in Joyce's driveway, and he has nowhere to go, but moving fast in any direction always makes him feel better, less caged in. He drives until he's low on gas, refills at that same 7-11 station, smiles too wide at the cashier.

He's aimless and keyed up, doesn't know where he's going, but he discovers after a while that he's moving in some kind of grid pattern. Looking for something.

Someone, he realizes, when he catches his ears straining over the sound of his engine, listening for an answering roar. He's looking for Billy Hargrove.

He doesn't have any damn business looking for Billy Hargrove, and Steve sure as hell doesn't want them anywhere near each other. But Ronan likes the way Billy looks at him sometimes. Like he knows

exactly what he is.

And, beneath that, like he likes what he sees.

Ronan's ruined enough lives in Hawkins. He stops listening for hair metal, aims his bike toward the only bar in town that hasn't carded him once.

- - -

Ronan's too young to be in this bar, but so is Billy. No one's going to say anything to them about it. Not unless they cause problems. Billy, for what it's worth, has learned how and when to be *not a problem*. He's learned a lot of things.

Once you learn what people want from you, you can just feed it back to them in pieces. *Yes, sir. No, sir.*

That 's how you do it, Hawkins!

I didn 't know Stacy had a sister.

Billy slides into the empty chair across from Ronan. It puts his back to the door, but that's fine. Susan and his dad are having some bullshit date night two towns over. If his dad needs a drink after that, he won't go out looking until after eleven at the earliest.

Billy will be home long before then.

"So," he says, "you the reason Harrington missed class today?"

Ronan's been staring hard at the ashtray. He doesn't jump when Billy speaks, but his jaw works a little. When he looks up, his eyes are red and empty. For two beats of Billy's heart, Ronan looks at him like he has no idea who he is.

"You look like shit," Billy says.

He does, and he doesn't. It's the inverse of how he looked at that Halloween party. Back then, he'd been raw and electric and hungry, looking for a fight, looking for anything at all. His eyes are taxidermy-dead now. Less like a live shark scenting blood and more like that animatronic shark from *Jaws*, an empty puppet with teeth.

When he lifts his beer to his mouth, Billy sees the reddened wreck of his knuckles.

Billy wonders who the hell he's been fighting. He wonders why it wasn't him.

"Billy," Ronan tells him, after he sips and swallows, sets his glass back down. He gives Billy his own name like it's some kind of answer.

"You wasted?" Billy asks, leaning forward. He wouldn't know. He's never seen Ronan drunk.

Hell, he's barely seen Ronan at all. But, like Steve Harrington, he has a way of featuring in Billy's idle thoughts.

He's damn sure thought about Ronan more than he's seen him.

Ronan smirks at the question, but it's almost a grimace. Like it's funny. Like it hurts. Like it's funny that it hurts. "I'm a waste," he offers.

You 're useless. You're fucking useless .

"Hey, c'mon," Billy says, rocking forward, leaning close. "Not with cheekbones like that."

Ronan catches him by the wrist before Billy can touch him. He shies like a mean dog from a bad family, sneers his lips back away from his teeth as he looks at Billy, at Billy's hand, back at Billy. It's less of a flinch and more of a tactical repositioning.

He doesn't pull far enough away, though. Billy can still touch him. Pats him once, twice, three times on the face.

Ronan seems confused by that, just stares at him.

Someone cut the puppet's strings, and now he's lifeless.

Billy stretches his fingers out and does it again, but he leaves them there this time, resting against the line of Ronan's cheekbone. Ronan, for some reason, just lets him do it. Lets him touch him.

"Poor baby," Billy says. "Did Harrington break up with you? Kick you out? You need a place to stay?"

Ronan's hand flexes around Billy's wrist. He pushes Billy away, but doesn't put any strength behind it. Like Billy isn't worth the attention. Like he's some fly Ronan's swatting away.

Billy shifts, flexes fast, puts his shoulder into it. He slams Ronan's wrist back against the table, damn near smacking Ronan in the face with his own hand.

Ronan's eyes go to his glass, frowning over the wave of beer that nearly crests over the side.

But Billy's attention is elsewhere. "So," he says, staring at Ronan's wrist, "you lucky?"

Ronan tugs on his arm, but Billy's got leverage, and he holds him in place. He brings his other hand around to trace those numbers, fingernail scrapping across the pale skin on the inside of Ronan's arm.

013, it says. Tattooed in neat, blocky numbers, like something off a calculator.

Ronan tugs again, harder this time, and Billy's nail catches on his skin, scrapes all the way up to his palm, pulls Ronan's stupid leather bracelets away from his wrist.

There's a scar there, under those bracelets. Ugly, raised. Didn't heal pretty.

"What the fuck is this?" Billy says, catching at Ronan's palm, his fingers, trying to keep him still. But Ronan finally puts some real intent behind it, and Billy can't hold him. He lets go before he gets dragged across the table.

“What do you think it is?” Ronan asks.

Billy wonders, suddenly, if he’s high. Ronan doesn’t seem the right kind of out of it for drunk. And the way he’s watching Billy now, like he’s waiting for Billy to explain his own scars to him, is spacey and distant, almost eerie enough to make Billy get up and leave.

He’s known since the beginning that Ronan is dangerous. This is the first time he’s thought maybe Ronan is a kind of dangerous he’s never met before.

He leans forward instead of pulling away, tries to catch another glimpse of that scar. Ronan flips him off.

“Kinda looks to me,” Billy says, slowly, “like you hacked the shit out of yourself.”

Ronan’s head rocks back, and he smiles, and he’s laughing, maybe. That silent, soundless laugh of his.

“How the hell else do you get a scar like that?” Billy says, feeling defensive, confused. Angry, a little. He thought he’d found some kind of vulnerability, but Ronan’s laughing at him like he’s a clown.

“I pulled a monster out of a dream,” Ronan says. He’s smiling when he says it, but a long drink of beer washes the smile off his face.

Billy stares at him. “You fucking what?”

Ronan gives him a look over the lip of his glass and then sets it aside and leans forward, conspiratorial. “Got sick of all the white walls. So I gave them what they wanted, but I figured only once, right? Bring out a dragon, burn the fucking bridge.”

He puts his hand back on the table and pulls the bracelets and shows the scar.

But it’s the wrong side of his arm.

He didn’t get cut. Something went *through* him.

Billy sees it, just for a second. The hole punched right through his

wrist, the blood. How much it must've hurt.

"Fuck," he says. "Ronan—"

"Hey," someone says. Shouts. It's the bartender, pointing at Ronan, looking disgruntled. "Asshole," he says, "you've got a phone call."

Ronan's hand closes over his own wrist, covering the scar. He blinks his eyes shut, and, when they open, he's the kid from the Halloween party, the shithead on the basketball court, the guy who shouldered his way into Billy's car. He pushes his half-empty beer Billy's direction.

"Have a good night, Billy," he says.

"I don't want your sloppy seconds," Billy says, shoving the beer away from him.

"You sure? Kinda seems like you live for them," Ronan says, and then he's gone. He doesn't even answer the fucking phone call. He just walks right out the door.

5. Chapter 5

Steve calls Ronan because he knows he'll answer. Well, he's pretty sure. It takes him a while to track him down, but there aren't that many places Ronan tolerates in Hawkins and even fewer where his radio wouldn't reach him. The bartender hangs up on Steve without an explanation, but, a minute or so later, Ronan's muttering an aggrieved, "*What, Steve?*" into the radio.

"What Steve, over," Dustin prompts, unhelpfully, and Steve swipes the radio out of his hands.

"Dustin, come on," he says, "we're running low on allies, okay?"

Dustin's curls wave incredulously. "It's protocol."

"Ronan," Steve says, pushing Dustin back, holding the radio out of his reach, "are you sober?"

There's a pause, a beat or two longer than Steve is entirely comfortable with. When the answer finally comes, it's a decidedly uninspiring: "Sure."

"Sober *enough*?" Steve asks. "We've got a situation."

"Tell him about Mews," Dustin says. "Steve, he's gotta appreciate the severity of the--"

But Steve doesn't know who's listening. He's not saying anything about the cat or what might've eaten it into the radio. "Ronan," he says, "I need your help."

There's another pause. This time, when Ronan speaks, Steve can hear his motorcycle idling in the background. "Sober enough. Where are you?"

"Dustin's house," Steve says.

Ronan doesn't say anything else, but he shows up at Dustin's house right as they're about to unlock the chains holding the cellar closed. Dustin explains the situation in shrill, excitable tones while Ronan

stares at the chained-shut door like someone told him he's getting locked in there next.

"Just one?" he asks, when there's finally a break in Dustin's reenactment.

"Just— *just* one?" Dustin repeats.

"I saw more than that," Ronan says, and, for one long, blissful second, that doesn't make any sense at all.

But then Steve remembers this morning, remembers how Ronan looked when he woke up. "How many did you see?" he asks.

Ronan shakes his head. He kicks the cellar doors open, grabs the bat out of Steve's hands, and clatters down the stairs before Steve can stop him.

"*Ronan*," he says, rushing after him. "Ronan, what the fuck are you— *wait*."

But there's no monster down there, just a loose bag of freshly-shed skin that drips fluid when Ronan pokes it with the bat, leaves a wet smear on the concrete floor of the cellar. "What the shit is that?" Dustin asks, when he pokes his head down after them.

And that's a fair question, but Steve's staring deeper into the cellar, at the tunnel that disappears downwards. The tunnel that means the creature that ate Dustin's cat is loose, could be anywhere. Could be eating anything.

"I should've finished that beer," Ronan announces.

"Yeah," Steve says. "You should've brought me one too."

- - -

Ronan follows Steve home. There's no point in staying away from

him. Not if the barrier's already been breached. Ronan doesn't know how one of those things made it through, but he's pretty sure it wasn't him, and, if it wasn't him, then the rules have changed.

"Look," Steve says, when Ronan walks into his kitchen, "if we're still fighting, can we at least call a truce for tonight?"

Ronan's not good at truces. But there's not much he wouldn't do for Steve Harrington, especially when he looks like that. All frazzled and folded in on himself, eyes distant and tired.

"Yeah," Ronan says. "Sure."

He should apologize. He can feel the words log-jammed in his throat, swelling like they're going to kick right through his trachea. But he doesn't even know what he's apologizing for.

He doesn't have to apologize for what the people at the Lab made him into. He's just not sure there's anything else left.

"Are you gonna sleep?" Steve asks. He rubs at his face, pinches the bridge of his nose. He should be packing his bags. He should be running.

It's fucking mystifying, the way Steve's holding his ground. Ronan's never going to understand him. He doesn't know where all that courage comes from.

"No," Ronan says. There's no reason to lie.

Steve sighs. "What if I—"

"No, Steve," Ronan says.

"Okay," Steve says, holds his hands up like he's surrendering. "Then what're you gonna do? Shotgun some coffee, pick another fight with my garage?"

He should go out and buy more cigarettes, drive around. Head back to that bar, hit on someone bigger than him, fight about it. Take a cold shower, go running while he's still dripping wet, force his body back to awareness.

He should go find El. He should go find Hopper.

He should figure out how to stop everything before it spirals too far to be brought back. But they're going to hunt that thing tomorrow, and who the hell knows what they'll be fighting the day after that?

It's going to be a long night. He's tired. There's a monster out there, and unattended cats aren't going to suffice for long.

"Let's just watch TV," Ronan says. He doesn't know what's on. It doesn't matter.

Steve blinks at him. "TV?"

"Yeah." Ronan tries to keep his face neutral.

What they did to him at the Lab didn't cut all the soft things out of him. All those things, all those messy, muddled instincts, they're still breathing in his chest. Sometimes it feels like they severed his vocal cords, like he can reach out all he wants to, but he can't say a damn thing.

"Okay," Steve says. "Sure."

There's a M*A*S*H marathon on one of the channels, and they put it on so quiet that it's almost muted. Ronan drinks coffee from three mugs in turn, brings them all over and lines them up on the sidetable, within reaching distance.

Steve falls asleep an hour in, head on Ronan's shoulder, the back of one hand laying against Ronan's thigh. His hair smells faintly floral, like he's been using that girly hairspray again, and it should be too sweet, too chemical, but Ronan likes it anyway.

There were never any flowers in the Lab. Never anything that smelled like them, either.

Ronan drinks his coffee, watches the show. Listens to the soft sounds of Steve sleeping and listens, underneath that, for anything that scraps or snarls in the night.

- - -

The next day, Steve leads them through the forest. They leave a trail of raw meat behind them as a trap to lure the escaped monster Dustin keeps calling “Dart,” and Ronan walks along beside them and doesn’t speak, doesn’t scowl, doesn’t seem aware of what they’re doing at all.

“You don’t have to stay,” Steve says, but he doesn’t know what he’ll do if Ronan leaves.

Ronan laughs without opening his mouth, jaw clenched tight. He’s looking down at the raw meat in his hand. “Where the fuck am I gonna go?”

And, fair. Sure. Where the fuck is Ronan ever going to go? But he always seems to find somewhere to run.

Later, Lucas shows up at the junkyard with Billy Hargrove’s redheaded little sister, and Steve would have questions about her, but mostly he’s just thinking about last year. About that thing he fought in the Byers’ house. About the way its face peeled apart, about the noises it made.

“Ronan,” he says, when it’s getting late enough that he’s definitely going to have to say something, “you have a weapon, right?”

Ronan shrugs. He’s been getting quieter and quieter. Every minute spent out here pushes his volume dial one tick lower. “Picked up a gun in Boston.”

“He picked up a gun in Boston,” Dustin repeats, elbowing Lucas. “I told you.”

“Told him what?” Steve asks, even though he’s been doing his best, all afternoon, not to encourage Dustin’s frank curiosity about Ronan.

“You used to be a hitman for the government, right?” Dustin asks, peering up at Ronan. “And you went rogue? Like, that’s what they were training you for in the Lab?”

Ronan stares down at him, head bent forward, mouth pressed tightly closed. Steve steps wrong, comes to a stop, can't figure out which one of them he should move towards.

"He can't be a hitman," Max says. "Jesus, listen to yourself. He's not old enough."

"You don't know," Dustin says. "The Lab was crazy, Max. They were breaking child labor laws every *day*."

"Yeah," Ronan says, slowly, blinking back to himself. "It's the child labor laws I'm upset about. A fucking travesty. An insult to unions."

"Solidarity," Dustin says, with a serious nod. "*I* know."

Lucas scoffs, audibly.

"What?" Dustin says. "I *do* know. My uncle's in a union! Lucas, your *dad's* in a union."

"He's not in a teenage hitman union," Lucas says, "because they don't *exist*."

"How would you know? You haven't even checked with the Department of Labor!" Dustin's voice goes shrill, and Steve stops listening.

He hooks a hand around Ronan's elbow, tugs him away from the others. Ronan's feet stay planted long enough to prove that following Steve is a choice, and then he lets Steve herd him toward some scrap metal across the junkyard.

They kick through the pile, looking for something they can use to reinforce the bus. Because that's what they're doing. They're reinforcing a bus to hide in while they lure in a creature that wants to eat their skin and muscle and brains.

Some kids, Steve knows, are still upset because they didn't get lucky on Halloween.

Actually, maybe Steve's still a little upset about that, too. Especially if he gets devoured by a monster tonight.

“You wanna get some sleep?” Steve asks. “Before this happens?”

The look Ronan gives him so flat that Steve gets hit with a sudden, vivid memory of the way Ronan had looked at him when he first found him in the shed: doll-eyed empty, braced for impact. “I can’t go over there right now.”

It doesn’t usually bother him, how weird Ronan gets. But Ronan doesn’t usually get *this* eerie.

“You need to sleep eventually,” Steve says. He’s just trying to be practical. “Ronan, come on. If you’re gonna be waving a gun around, I don’t want you hallucinating that one of the kids is a fucking--”

Ronan rears up like Steve just suckerpunched him. A beat after that, he shoves Steve back against the abandoned van, pins him against the side. “I have *never*,” he says, low and furious. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Hey,” Steve says, more startled than hurt. Usually he knows where Ronan’s landmines are hidden. “Hey, Ronan--”

“I never hurt anyone I didn’t mean to,” Ronan says. “I haven’t.”

He says it like he means it, but also like he isn’t sure. Like it’s something he’s told himself, over and over again, because he could never quite get himself to believe it.

“I know that,” Steve says, although he doesn’t. He has no idea what Ronan did, what they made him do. “I’m just worried about you.”

Ronan blinks, resets. He drops Steve and steps back. His fingers flex and then curl inward. “Don’t worry about me.”

Steve huffs out a breath. Ronan didn’t hurt him. Didn’t even really scare him. But something about that moment left him breathless anyway. “Who else is gonna do it?” he calls, to Ronan’s retreating back.

Ronan just flips him off, grabs some scrap off the ground, gets back to work.

- - -

Steve keeps handing Dustin some truly fascinating relationship advice, and Ronan keeps his mouth shut because, after all, what would he know about it? His dating experience is limited to one guy in Boston, and he's still not sure if they ever really liked each other.

"That's good," Steve says, when the redhead storms up the ladder after Lucas, shooting Dustin one last irate glare as she goes. "Just show her that you don't care."

"I don't," Dustin says. And then, a beat later, "Why're you winking, Steve? Ronan. Why is he winking?"

Ronan shrugs. He's watching the lighter in Steve's hands, watching the fire kick up and then disappear, flare and fade. "Hell, kid," he says, "I have no idea why he does anything."

Outside, the fog's so thick that it's making the hair on the back of Ronan's neck stand up. When the fog gets like this, he could be over There. It's the haze of just-past-twilight, stars not out yet, moon tucked away behind the clouds. It's so fucking dark. There could be anything out there.

Ronan's thinking about that when he hears it, the high, growling shriek of something that wants to eat him alive.

He closes his eyes, tips his head back, feels the metal of the bus behind him, hears the scramble and hiss of the kids, searching out a monster in the dark.

Lucas finds it - "*Ten o'clock, ten o'clock*" - and Steve tracks it - "*There*" - but it doesn't come any closer.

These things, Ronan knows, are getting smarter.

"He's not taking the bait," Steve says. He's staring out through a hole in the scrap, lighter still in his hands. "Why is he not taking the bait?"

Ronan wonders if it was ever interested in the meat. Maybe it only followed that bloody trail because those bite-sized pieces of beef smelled like them.

“Maybe he’s not hungry,” Dustin says.

Steve looks down at Ronan, and Ronan stares back up at him, and Ronan doesn’t know if this is some underdeveloped ability kicking in or if he just knows Steve well enough to read him by expression alone.

“Maybe he’s sick of cow,” Steve says. And then he’s tossing the lighter to Dustin, telling him to get ready.

Ronan slides to his feet, lifts the gun, thumbs off the safety. That boy in Boston liked him well enough to sell him a gun, well enough to teach him how to use it. Maybe that’s all the love someone like Ronan needs.

He follows close behind Steve. Their feet touch the ground together, and Ronan steps up next to him, shoulder-to-shoulder. He doesn’t say anything. Steve, next to him, whistles like he’s calling a dog. “C’mon, buddy,” he says, low and cajoling. “Come on. Dinner time. Human tastes better than cow, I promise.”

The creature’s crouched on four legs, staring toward them. When that face pulls apart, it’ll be all teeth. Ronan tries to figure out where to shoot it. Steve swings the bat, warming up, and Ronan wants to step in front of him, but they’re stronger side-by-side.

And then the kids are screaming again: “*Three o’clock, three o’clock*” and “*abort, abort!*” And when Ronan looks, there are three more monsters flanking them. Three more, and he’s on the wrong side of Steve.

“Shit,” Steve says, and then someone’s slamming the bus door open, and they’re moving.

Ronan shoots, just once. It’s too fast for anything else, but there’s a thump and a roar, so he probably hit one. Steve hits another with his bat, and the way to the bus is clear for four seconds, which is just

enough time.

When they're inside, they slam the door shut, and Ronan holds it, leans hard into it, feels something heavy slam into the other side.

He didn't get a count. He doesn't know how many there are. *Enough*, he thinks. *Fuck, two would've been too many.*

It's a nightmare; he's Dreaming. But he isn't. And there's a way out when he's asleep, but there's no way out now, and Ronan's holding the door, but one of them has climbed onto the roof.

The girl screams, high-pitched, terrible. Reminds him of the Lab. Reminds him of hearing El through the walls between their testing rooms.

Jesus Christ, he's going to hold this door, and they're going to come in through the open emergency hatch. They're going to eat these kids while he watches, while he's just stuck here, holding the door.

Steve hauls the kids back. "Out of the way! Out of the way!" He puts himself in front of them, yells up at the creature crawling into the bus, so, it's going to eat Steve first, and Ronan doesn't know if that's a mercy or not.

He leans his shoulder into the door, lifts the gun. He doesn't have a clear shot.

And then, somehow, it's over. All the creatures retreat. Ronan lowers the gun, stays on his feet. Breathes in kinda shakey and then irons himself out, straightens up.

"What happened?" Dustin asks, as Ronan shoves the door open, looks out. He can just see the figures of four of those things, trotting away, headed south. "Did we scare them off?"

Ronan laughs. Steve steps up next to him, curls a hand around his shoulder. "No way," he says. "They're going somewhere."

Ronan looks over at him. He's windblown, flushed. He's alive. Ronan's eyes drop to his mouth and then he forces them away, stares after the creatures, tracks their trajectory. He wonders if Steve's

doing the same thing.

“The Lab,” Ronan says, because Steve won’t.

“You don’t have to go,” Steve tells him, quiet. “Ronan. You don’t—”

Ronan breathes in, breathes out. Feels all those words he can’t say dammed up in his throat. “Fuck you, Steve,” he says. “Let’s go.”

- - -

There’s a pack of monsters, five or maybe six, and one of them is eating Bob Newby, and Jim promised him he’d get Joyce and the boys out of the Lab. The other creatures are looking at him, and there’s too many of them to track, too many to stop. And even if he did, what then? There’s more behind them.

Outflanked, outgunned. Jim remembers this.

Sometimes you retreat with whatever pieces of your people you can scrape together. Sometimes you leave their bodies behind.

Sometimes, sure, but it’s been a long time now, and he thinks it probably shouldn’t come back so quickly, shouldn’t be so easy. He thinks some part of him should falter, but he grabs Joyce, and he drags her out, and she’s screaming, reaching back for Bob, but he doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t slow down.

He drags her out where Mike’s holding the still-unconscious Will Byers off the sidewalk. “What happened?” he yells, finally sounding exactly as young as he really is.

“He’s gone,” Jim says, because Joyce is still reaching back, still lunging against him, still trying to get back to Bob, who’s in pieces, who’s probably still alive, who’s dying in there. “He’s *gone*.”

Behind him, the creatures are throwing themselves against the security doors. Polycarbonate, Jim remembers. Supposedly

indestructible. He figures they've got maybe thirty seconds before those doors give.

There's a mechanical roar, familiar, hooking Jim's attention, and then Ronan Lynch is barreling in on his motorcycle. He stops, tires squealing, right in front of them, and so that's room for one, maybe two. *Joyce and Mike*, Jim thinks, because no way an unconscious kid is staying on that bike.

"Ronan," Jim says, and he tries to drag Joyce toward him.

"Fuck," Ronan says. He's staring behind them, toward the doors. "The others," he says, a beat later. He twists behind him, and suddenly Jim can see headlights.

A car pulls up, honking, and it's Jonathan Byers with Nancy Wheeler in the passenger seat. A car's enclosed steel cage beats Ronan's bike, and so Jim reorients. "Joyce," he says, "get in the car."

"*Jonathan?*" Joyce says, staring.

"What the hell is going on?" Jonathan yells back.

"Come *on*," Nancy says, leaning over him. "Let's go!"

"Steve's got three kids at the gate," Ronan says, as Jim's grabbing Will from Mike and dragging him into the backseat.

That two-door car isn't going to hold two adults, four teenagers, and five kids. They need another car.

"The Bronco," he says. Somehow, he still has his keys. "Across the lot." He slams the car door shut as soon as both kids and Joyce are inside. "Go!" he says, and Jonathan peels out, gets them out of here.

Just like Jim promised. Just like he told Bob he would.

"Hopp," Ronan says. "Bring that gun and get the fuck over here."

There's an ominous sound from the doors, a kind of creaking that bodes very poorly for the structural integrity of all that indestructible polycarbonate. When Jim looks back, there are even more of the

monsters. A dozen, easy. Two dozen, maybe.

“Bronco,” Jim says, as he climbs behind Ronan. “Come on, let’s go. I hate your fucking bike.”

“You can walk,” Ronan yells back, but he’s going way too fast for that now.

When Jim looks behind them, he sees that one of the doors has been smashed open, and they’re spilling out, dark shapes in the dark lot, moving after them.

It takes maybe ten seconds to get to the Bronco, but those creatures move *fast*, and Jim doesn’t calculate the odds, doesn’t think about it. Without the Bronco, Steve and the others are walking. If they’re walking, they’re dead. He throws himself off the back of Ronan’s bike, damn near falls on his face, rights himself just in time to take the side of the Bronco to his shoulder, and his whole right arm is numb, so he unlocks it with his left, hauls himself inside.

Ronan doesn’t stop. He swings his bike in a wide arc, leading the creatures away from Jim, and he falls in behind as Jim slams the pedal down, speeds through the parking lot, chasing after Jonathan and the others.

They’re so fast, though. And there’s so many of them. And Jim’s leading them right to Steve and the kids, doesn’t know if he’s going to have time to load them up before the creatures find them.

“Shit,” he says. “Shit, shit. *Shit.*”

It’s going to happen again. What happened to Bob. It’s going to happen to Steve Harrington and three kids, and Jim doesn’t know what to do, can’t figure out how he’s going to protect them.

Behind him, the headlight of Ronan’s motorcycle swerves off-course.

And, when he looks in the rearview, Jim can see him, drifting left, slowing down.

He’s easier prey. Unprotected, moving slower. They go right for him, scrambling over each other to get to him, and Ronan stays ahead, but

not by much.

He draws them away, and, when Jim pulls up next to the kids waiting at the gatehouse, he gets all of them in the car without losing any of them.

“Ronan,” Steve says, hanging half out of the still-open door, staring back. “Where’s--”

“He’s buying time,” Jim says. And he reaches over, grabs Steve’s jacket, hauls him into the car.

Ronan’s buying time, and Jim isn’t going to waste it.

- - -

When Billy steps away from the Wheeler house, Ronan is leaning back against his Camaro. He looks like a Goddamn degenerate. He’s wearing a white shirt that says *No Values* on it, for Christ’s sake. His tattoo is peaking out over his collar, his arms are bare, his jeans are ripped, his boots are scuffed.

There’s dirt smeared across one elbow, what might be mud or dried blood flecked on his arms.

Billy’s thankful Karen Wheeler didn’t get an eyeful of him before she let Billy in, or she never would’ve given up the location to the nearest pay phone, much less a missing teenage girl.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Billy hisses, as he moves up the driveway.

“The fuck’s wrong with *you*?” Ronan volleys back, eyeing Billy’s chest. “Did you just go tits out at Nancy’s mom?” He sounds disgusted, and begrudgingly impressed. “Did it work?”

“Get off my car,” Billy says.

"I'm getting in your car," Ronan says.

Billy is so taken back by the offhand way Ronan says it that he comes to a complete stop. Right there, with his hand outstretched toward his own car door but not quite touching the handle. "The fuck you are," he says, finally. "Is your bike broken?"

It can't be *that* broken. It's parked on the street. Looks fine.

Ronan makes a face, mouth screwing up in a scowl. "Not really interested in being Meals on Wheels anymore. I'd prefer something with a roof."

"I don't give a shit what you'd prefer," Billy says. "I'm not your chauffeur. I'm looking for my stepsister. Apparently, she's at the Byers' house."

Ronan raises those expressive eyebrows of his. In the dark, his cheekbones look like they could cut someone's face clean off their skull.

"I'm getting in your car," Ronan says, "or I'm gonna call over there and scatter those kids to the four winds. And you're gonna have to get real slutty if you think Joyce fucking Byers is gonna tell you where they've gone. She's not gonna give it up for a nip slip and a smile."

Billy wants to climb over the top of the car and strangle him. He wants to put his hands on his throat, wants to bite him.

"Huh," Ronan says. He leans forward, squints at Billy in the weak streetlamp light. "Someone pop you in the mouth, Hargrove?"

Billy feels the blood hit his face, feels the shame in his stomach, the flinch on the inside. Feels the dull ache of the bruise forming on his cheekbone, the sting of the small split in his lip. He doesn't think about his dad. Doesn't think about what happened, when his dad and Susan came home to find Maxine missing.

"What the fuck do you care?" he asks.

Ronan tips his head, seems to think that one over for a minute. "Just

jealous, I guess.”

Jealous.

Billy’s going to kill him. He’s going to kill him, and he’s going to kill Max, and he’s going to kill whoever else he can find.

He’s going to get them all in one place, and then he’s going to fucking kill them.

“Get in the fucking car,” he says.

“You’re a prince,” Ronan says, and climbs in like he owns it.

Halfway to the Byers’ house, Ronan starts fucking with his stereo. “Goddamn hair metal bullshit,” he says, hands all over the place, all over dials, the buttons. “Everything about you gotta be pretty, Hargrove? You ever considered—”

Billy elbows him in the throat. Ugly, mean. *Hard.*

Ronan punches him in the ribs. A hammerfist directly to the side, so sudden and vicious that it makes Billy choke.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Billy says, like he wasn’t the one who started this. Like he didn’t throw the first punch. “You wanna die? I’m *driving.*”

“Yeah, I can see you’re making an attempt,” Ronan says.

And Billy’s sick of it. Suddenly and completely. All this shit, all the time. The way people look at him, the things people say. He’s so fucking loud about it. He’s shitty, and loud, and he doesn’t know why they need to talk about it.

Why the fuck does everyone always tell him he’s trash? Isn’t it perfectly fucking clear that he already knows?

He swerves into the oncoming lane. He shoves the gas pedal to the floor. The Camaro screams for him, roars in the dark like something wounded.

“Yeah?” Ronan says, and it’s the first time Billy’s actually heard him laugh. It’s low, a little shakey, comes out of his throat like a snake rattling its tail.

“Yeah,” Billy says, because fuck him.

Ronan nods, slow, and then lights a fucking cigarette. “Turn your headlights off,” he says, like it’s a dare. “Don’t be a bitch about it. Let’s go.”

Billy flicks off the high beams, the low beams, leaves them in running lights on a twisty backwoods road going eighty at night. Ronan laughs again. His cigarette is the brightest thing in the world.

Until the semitruck turns into view, coming right for them.

Maybe the driver can’t even see them, Billy thinks. Maybe he doesn’t even know what they are.

The stereo is dead silent, and Billy can hear the truck, the wind. Ronan, breathing.

“Shit,” Ronan says. He doesn’t sound scared. He sounds delighted.

Billy wanted him to be scared. *Needed* him to be scared.

Still needs him to be scared.

Well, they’ve still got time. Ten seconds, maybe.

There’s a flash of movement in Billy’s peripheral vision, and he almost flinches. They’re going so Goddamn fast, and he knows exactly when to pull right, but, if Ronan touches the steering wheel, they’re fucked. If they leave the asphalt, they’re flipping, and neither one of them even blinked at their seatbelts when they got in the car.

But Ronan doesn’t reach for the wheel. His fingers brush Billy’s hip, slide across his thigh. He cups him through his jeans. His hand is deliberate, warm.

“What,” Billy says.

He looks over. Ronan's staring into the headlights of the ongoing truck. The trucker finally sees them, slams on his horn, his brakes.

It's a gamble now. Only partially in Billy's control. If the trucker flinches wrong, they're dead.

Ronan's still watching the truck when he thumbs open the button of Billy's jeans.

"Jesus," Billy says, and pulls the wheel. The truck flies past them, still laying on the horn, and it takes the Camaro nine full seconds to stop, tires screaming.

Ronan looks over at him, blue eyes steady and thoughtful, and then he takes his hand away and brings his cigarette up to his mouth. "We could just fool around *without* making random truckers shit themselves," he says.

"What the fuck was that?" Billy says. "Why'd you— you touched me. What the *fuck*."

Ronan shrugs. He's watching Billy carefully, which isn't how he usually watches Billy. He usually watches Billy like they're on separate sides of a ring and he's waiting for someone to yell *fight*. After a moment, he leans back in the seat and drops his hand out the window, ashes his cigarette. "Just trying to give you something to live for, Billy."

"I could do better," Billy says, when he can say anything at all.

"Sure," Ronan says, with an easy nod of his head and a small, ugly curl of his mouth. "But will you?"

Billy slams his hand against the steering wheel. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Ronan throws his cigarette out the window and then twists to face him. He moves fast, and Billy almost flinches. *Does* flinch when Ronan reaches for him, hand coming fast at his face, but Ronan just grins and moves closer, knee braced against the seat, already halfway into Billy's lap before he gets his mouth on him.

With his cheekbones and his attitude, Billy would've figured that making out with Ronan was like getting friendly with a switchblade. And it is, in the sense that it feels like a knife to the throat. And it is, in the way that a knife to the throat makes you hyperaware of everything, of the push of air and the rush of blood, of being alive.

There's no room, and Ronan's everywhere. Tastes like cigarettes, smells like smoke. Overpowering.

Billy shoves him back into his own seat, but he follows, and Ronan doesn't seem to mind getting pressed up against the car door so long as Billy has his hands on him, his mouth on him.

Ronan's hand lands on his chest and works down, and, for all his bitching earlier, he seems just fine with the number of undone buttons now.

When he touches Billy's face, Billy tenses up, waiting for it to hurt, and Ronan's other hand stalls on his stomach, fingernails catching on his abs, thumb moving once, a quick steadying circle like he's trying to soothe him.

The hand on his face is light, palm raised away from his cheekbone, no pressure at all where the bruise is forming.

"Fuck," Billy says. He's thinking about California. He's thinking about breathing through a broken nose. He's thinking about having to pull over in Arizona so he could puke up the blood he'd been swallowing all morning. He's thinking about the smell of all that blood cooking on the asphalt.

He's thinking about nothing, about *nothing*.

About Ronan's tongue in his mouth, his hand dragging down to his waistband.

Ronan kisses him like he's trying to win something, like he's got thirty seconds or less to ruin Billy's whole fucking life. Even back in California, no one ever kissed Billy like he was any kind of prize.

"Your fucking hair," Ronan says, hand sliding back to tighten in his hair. Just on the edge of too tight.

“Yeah, too bad about your cancer,” Billy says. His voice is low, rasping like he ate every cigarette in Ronan’s pack.

Ronan laughs that rattlesnake sound, but there’s that look in his eyes again, that weight. He looks at Billy like he knows him. Like, somehow, he likes what he sees.

Billy surges forward, gets his teeth into Ronan’s bottom lip.

Ronan makes a noise, a whine trying to pass as a growl, and his legs kick out wider. He lets Billy climb all over him.

When Billy gets his hand in Ronan’s pants, he makes that noise again, punched out, low, eyes closed, head tipped back against the window. A second later, he hisses in a sharp breath, and his hand tightens in Billy’s hair.

Too tight, can’t move.

This is what happens right before the hit lands. This is how he holds his head in place. Like every hit’s a lesson. *If you cut your hair, I couldn’t do this to you. If you were everything you were supposed to be, this wouldn’t happen.*

This happens because of you, because of how you are, because of what you are.

It’s a choice. Billy makes the same Goddamn choices every single time.

“Let go,” he says. He pulls back, and Ronan’s still got his fingers knotted in his hair, and it hurts for half a second before Ronan’s letting go, pulling back. “Let fucking go,” Billy says, even though Ronan already is, and he shoves Ronan, hard – maybe harder than the means to, maybe *exactly* as hard as he wants – into the car door.

Ronan’s head smacks against the window, and his eyes flutter shut. His jaw works. He chews through his pain like he can crack it between his molars.

“You know,” Ronan says, when his eyes slit open, “I bet Steve Harrington wouldn’t pull your hair.”

His voice is mean, but he softens a second later, almost smiles.

Billy's lost his taste for anything soft.

"What the hell does that mean?" he says, and he's still half on top of Ronan, but his hands are tightening in Ronan's shirt, one hand on *No* and one on *Values*, pulling that white collar tight across Ronan's throat.

Ronan looks down at Billy's hands and then up at his eyes, and now there's something like pity on his face. "It means if you want someone to be nice to you, maybe spend less time with people like me."

But nobody else ever lets this part of Billy get this close.

No one's going to see Billy's handprints on Ronan. But if he ever touched Steve Harrington, he'd ruin him.

"Get out," Billy says.

Ronan tenses up underneath him. "No," he says. And finally, *finally*, there's something like real fear in his eyes. "Fuck, Billy, listen. It's not —"

It's late, and Max needed to be home hours ago, and Billy's going to pay for every second he wastes with Ronan.

"Get *out*," he says. He reaches behind Ronan's head, yanks the door handle, and Ronan's not wearing his seatbelt, so he goes backwards, falls half out of the car. Billy shoves him the rest of the way, and Ronan lands awkwardly on his shoulder in the dirt, scrambles up.

"Fucking *wait*," he says, grabbing for the car. "Billy!"

But Billy floors it, doesn't care if he takes Ronan's whole arm off in the process, and then Ronan's just a shadow on a dark road in the rearview, fading to nothing at all.

6. Chapter 6

They're at the Byers' house for an hour, and then two, and Ronan doesn't show up. Eleven arrives, manifesting back in town just in time to throw a demo-dog through the Byers' living room window like a cat bringing home a dead bird, but Ronan doesn't make an appearance.

"It's Ronan," Hopper says, before he leaves with Eleven to try to close the gate. "Hey. *Hey*, Harrington. Look at me."

"I'm looking," Steve says, although he's looking up the street, toward the Lab.

"*Steve*," Hopper says, and Steve's eyes snap to his face. Hopper's expression is steady. A little wild around the eyes, but they've all almost died at least three times each tonight, and Steve doesn't even want to think about what his eyes look like. "Ronan knows what these things are. He knows what he's doing."

But Steve's not sure that's true. He was there, in that bus. Ronan didn't seem like he had any special cards left to play. Seemed like he was going to die just the same way the rest of them were.

"He was right behind you," Steve says. "You said he was right behind you."

Hopper shakes his head. His hand lands on Steve's shoulder, jostles him. "I need you here now."

Because Nancy, Jonathan, and Joyce are leaving to burn the monster out of Will, and Hopper and Eleven are going to close the gate, and Steve's job is to keep four preteens from getting murdered. But that's fine. He's actually turning out to be a pretty great babysitter.

"Yeah," he says, because they're apparently trying to save the world, and either Ronan's fine or he's not, but, either way, Steve needs to play his part. "Yeah, I'm here. Go. Good luck."

Hopper nods. His eyes go to the Bronco, where Eleven's waiting, all

in black and wearing an alarming amount of eyeliner. "If he shows up —"

"The radio," Steve says. "Yeah, I know."

Hopper claps him on the shoulder one more time, studies his face like he's memorizing it in case he needs to ID his body later, and then heads for the Bronco. Steve stands out on the porch with the kids until both cars are nothing but the memory of taillights, and then he herds them back inside.

"Okay," he says. "Let's clean this place up."

"What the hell?" Dustin says, open-mouthed and appalled, like being asked to sweep up broken glass and do something with all those creepy crayon drawings is the worst thing that's happened to him in living memory.

Yesterday, his cat got eaten by a monster, for fuck's sake.

"You think anybody's having a good night, Dustin? You think the Byers wanna come home and deal with this shit? Let's go. Get a broom, c'mon."

There's a moment where Steve thinks he's going to have to shut down an open mutiny, but then they yield either to his superior height advantage or the fact that they are not, in fact, complete assholes. Lucas, naturally, is the most useful, finding a broom and dustpan, and Max falls in with him, which is fine. They work well together. Dustin demands that Steve helps him preserve the dead demo-dog by loading it into Joyce Byers' fridge, and Steve amused enough by the concept to allow that to play out.

Mike wanders around being shellshocked and mostly unhelpful until he falls facefirst into the idea of charging right into certain doom. His plan, apparently, is to go into the tunnels and try to lure the creature to them.

He's in the middle of convincing the other three to join his suicide pact when Billy Hargrove pulls into the Byers' front yard.

Billy Hargrove finds him, and Ronan does not.

For one long moment, Steve considers answering the door with his baseball bat. But Billy's not a monster. He's just a shithead with bad taste in beer and music.

"Stay here," he says. And he leaves his bat sitting propped up in the living room, goes outside to find some way to get Billy out of here before he causes more problems.

- - -

Steve Harrington is at the house. Of course he's at the house. Billy watches as he steps out onto the porch, half-jogs down the steps to the dirt of the driveway.

"Am I dreaming?" Billy asks. "Or is that you, Harrington?"

"Yeah, it's me," he says, sounding tired, looking irritated. Looking like Billy's some kind of joke he's already tired of hearing. "Don't cream your pants."

Ronan's cigarettes are lying on the passenger seat. Billy grabs them and lights one as he steps out of the car, tosses the pack back onto the dashboard. Steve's eyes follow it, eyebrows pulling inward, and Billy wonders what he's thinking. If he recognizes the brand. If he knows who those belong to.

If he knows what Ronan does, when he's alone in cars with people like Billy, far out of sight of Steve.

"You know where your bodyguard is right now?" Billy asks. He breathes in, but the cigarette isn't right. Isn't his.

Maybe he likes that it isn't right.

Steve's wall of bored annoyance fissures apart. He blinks, blinks again. "Do you know where Ronan is right now?"

Eight miles back in the woods, Billy thinks. "Tell you what, Harrington.

I'll trade you: Ronan for Max."

Steve's jaw tightens. He steps closer. "Where is he, Billy?"

"Where's Max?" Billy says.

"I don't know," Steve says, but he hesitates before he says it. "She's not here."

But he's lying. And Billy knows he's lying, because he can see her, lit up by the living room lights, face pressed to the window right next to three of those boys she's always paling around with.

He points over Steve's shoulder. "Then who is that?"

Behind them, the kids duck down down, and Steve makes a face like he's been caught passing notes in class. "Oh, shit," he says, "listen--"

Steve's posted up in front of the house, hands on his hips. That wingspan won't be enough to hold Billy back.

He never did learn to plant his fucking feet.

When Billy shoves him, Steve falls to the ground, hard. A single kick to the ribs flattens him, and Billy steps right over him.

He leaves Steve in the dirt. He should've stayed there.

But he doesn't. Of course he doesn't. And Billy isn't hurting the Sinclair kid, not really. Not in a way that'll leave any marks. He's scaring him. It works, sometimes. It used to work on him, before the fear lost its staying power and he needed something more potent, more lasting.

The kid kicks him in the balls. The kid isn't scared for a second.

Billy doesn't know why the hell no one in this town acts right.

Even Harrington, when he finally starts throwing punches. He's supposed to be soft, but he bloodies Billy's nose in one hit, finishes splitting his lip with the second.

The taste of blood is familiar. Being backed against a kitchen sink is familiar. But it's not his house, not his dad, and he doesn't have to eat these punches. Doesn't have to, doesn't want to, never wanted to. Never fucking wanted any of those hits to land.

It's like a wishbone snapping in his head. Someone wins, someone loses.

He knows which role he wants to play, so he plays it.

He throws punches until Steve's out, and he knows he's out, and he can't stop throwing punches. Doesn't want to stop. Thinks, once it's over, he has to clean up the mess. Once he's done throwing punches, he has to start taking them.

It's easy. It's repetitive. There's a pattern to it.

You inhale on the drawback, exhale through impact.

Inhale, exhale. Inhale.

- - -

Ronan can hear the kids screaming from outside the house. The door's swinging wide, light spilling out onto the porch, doorway yawning like a portal from one world to the next. Ronan damn near rides the bike right through it and into Joyce Byers' house.

When he gets inside, Billy's on Steve, and Steve isn't moving.

Steve Harrington, who fights monsters with a baseball bat.

Billy, who fights any fucking thing he can find.

Ronan chokes him: right arm wrapped around his throat, left arm wrapped around his head, pressure on the side of the neck, cutting off the blood flow to the brain while he drags Billy off Steve. Ronan knows this hold. They used to do it to him. Feels better on this side of

things.

Billy kicks his feet, reaches back, gouges his fingernails into the side of Ronan's head, but can't find anything to hold onto. Ronan keeps his head tucked, shoulders up, so Billy can't get a decent grip on either one of his ears.

Seems like he doesn't really try, though. Seems like he's not used to this kind of fight.

Billy's motions are getting kitten-weak and uncoordinated when Max stabs him in the arm with a syringe.

"That fuck is that?" Ronan asks, yanking Billy back before she can empty it into his arm. If they're killing him, he'd like to know about it while there are still flesh-eating monsters they could plausibly pin it on.

And, also, he thinks it should probably be him doing the murdering, not a twelve-year-old girl.

"Sedative," Mike says. Dustin and Lucas are on the floor, trying to get Steve to wake up.

And it's not a *bad* idea. Ronan doesn't know that they can afford the distraction of a fully conscious Billy Hargrove right now.

But, still. Priorities.

"Give him half," Ronan says. "Save the rest. I might need it."

His nose is dripping blood onto Billy Hargrove's blonde hair. But that's only fair. Billy's the reason he's bleeding in the first place.

He Dreamed out there in the woods, pulled a bike from There to Here, and he'd laid on his back with his belly and throat exposed to the sky while he waited for the paralysis to wear off. He could feel the blood, leaking from his nose down his face, a lure that would've drawn any nearby monsters right to him.

They could've eaten him alive out there. He would've just laid on the ground, let their teeth tear into him. He wouldn't have been able to

scream. He would've been stuck, staring up at the stars through the leaves, watching them lean back, pulling ribbons of him off his chest and arms, swallowing his flesh.

Across the room, Steve sits up. "Ro," he says, sloppy, slurping his own blood off his teeth, "what're you doing?"

He's killing Billy Hargrove is what he's fucking doing.

He tries to remember how long it's been since Billy went limp. But he doesn't know. He wasn't counting.

When he loosens his grip, Billy falls to the floor. And Ronan wonders if he really did kill him, if he lost that much time, if he fucked up that badly, but then Billy's fingers flex against the carpet, and he groans, and Ronan breathes out, shakes his head, makes himself stop caring.

- - -

"Hey, Billy," Ronan says, when he's driving Billy's car like he's known it his whole life. "You got any tattoos?"

"Fuck you," Billy says. He's having some trouble remembering how to swallow. His lungs are operating more or less under their own recognizance, but, if he's not careful, he's gonna spill drool all down his face.

"Uh-huh," Ronan says. "Bet you do."

There are five people in the backseat. Four kids and Steve Harrington, whose face is a fucking mess.

Billy made that mess.

Jesus Christ. Jesus *Christ*.

"Hey, Billy," Ronan says, spinning them through a turn, "how many of your tattoos are lightning bolts?"

Billy tips his head back. His mouth is full of saliva. He swallows, and it's a concentrated, careful effort.

Reminds him of swallowing blood.

"Go fuck yourself," Billy says. He clears his throat.

"What's he talking about?" Dustin asks. "What's that mean?"

"Just happened to notice," Ronan continues, "that you put your hands on *one* kid back there, Billy. And I'd get it if it was Dustin. We'd all get it if it was--"

"Hey!"

"See? We'd *get* it. But Lucas is the second least annoying kid in that group, and Will is practically wallpaper, so--"

"*Max*," Billy says, as loud as he can. "You're fucking dead."

Something about that – the volume, or maybe the word choice toward the end – rouses Harrington out of his stupor. He lifts his head, looks around. "The hell?" he says. "What's—where—Ronan, *no*."

Ronan snorts. The engine revs louder.

"*Ronan*," Steve says.

"Don't worry, Steve," Ronan says, with the sweetest flash of smile Billy has ever seen from him. "I brought bait."

The look he gives Billy isn't promising, but Billy doesn't have the time or coordination to clarify his opinions. Ronan swerves through another turn, and something about the flash of lights in the periphery and the heavy sway of his body sends Billy right back into a semi-conscious state, and he doesn't blink back out of it until they're parked.

He breathes in, out. Shoves the car door open, gets hung up on the seatbelt he absolutely did not put on himself.

Everyone's suiting up in scuba masks, and Billy can barely get out of the car. Ronan lopes around the side to heave him the rest of the way to his feet, ducks the wild swing of Billy's open palm. "Look," Ronan says, scuba mask on his forehead, entirely too serious for the situation, "I'll be honest. I want you to live so I can beat the shit out of you later, but I'm not married to it."

"No one's dying," Steve's saying. Billy can't even look at him. He feels like he's gonna puke on his shoes.

"Damn straight," Dustin says, as he adjusts the mask on Lucas' face.

"He can barely move," Steve says. "He can't run. *Ronan*. We can't take him."

"*You* can barely move," Mike says.

Ronan points at Mike and then at Steve. "First rule of running for your life, Steve: never let someone you care about be the slowest member of the party. Okay? So we're bringing the racist."

"I'm *not*," Billy says and then shakes his head, closes his eyes. What the fuck does he care? What does it matter what these fucking people think?

They kidnapped him. They're in a pumpkin field. They're wearing swimming goggles and bandanas.

Fuck it. He *hopes* Max brings that kid home. He hopes she does. He just hopes like hell he's not in the house when it happens, because then it's somehow going to be his fault.

"Billy," Max says, half-strangled, and so that's how he realizes he said all of that out loud.

"I'm not a fucking racist," Billy says again, mulish. So maybe he *does* care what these people think.

"Great, Billy," Ronan says, clapping him on the shoulder so hard that he damn near topples him into the hood. "Let's try acting like it, huh?"

“*Ronan*,” Steve says, sharp enough that Ronan’s hands go still in the air.

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” Billy tells him. As soon as he can throw a punch, he’s going to do to Ronan what he almost did to Steve.

Ronan grins at him, all teeth. “You almost fucking did. I’m just returning the favor.”

“We’re not doing this,” Steve says. “Billy doesn’t know anything about this. He’s not involved, Ronan. He’s not ready.”

Ronan’s jaw tightens. Billy can see the flex of tendons, pulled taut under the skin. He looks like he couldn’t care less what Billy’s ready for. “How can you say that?” he asks. “Look how brave he’s been about the button shortage.”

Steve hauls himself up out of the car. Parts of his face are still bleeding. When he wipes the back of his hand over his forehead, blood smears to his temple. “Ronan, these are *kids*.”

Ronan locks his jaw and has nothing at all to say to that.

Billy wonders what, exactly, they’re here to do.

Ronan slips goggles down over Billy’s eyes. The rubber cord tangles in his hair, a sharp point of pain until Ronan fixes it. And then he ties a bandana around Billy’s nose and mouth, presses him back against the car with his hips, and he’s not gentle, but it doesn’t hurt.

“Well, Billy and I are going in,” Ronan says. “So anyone who wants to sit this out, I’ll leave you the keys.” He tosses the keys to Billy’s Camaro on the hood and then he hooks his arm around Billy’s elbow and starts tugging him toward what Billy’s just now realizing is a massive hole in the ground.

“The fuck is this,” Billy says, too startled to ask a question properly. The bandana muffles his voice.

Ronan stares down into the darkness. With the goggles and the bandana, it’s impossible to get a read on him. But he glances over at Billy and, in that half second before his eyes crinkle up in a *fuck you*

smile, Billy sees that same fear he saw when he shoved Ronan out of the car.

“You wanted to be king of Hawkins, Billy,” Ronan says. “So now it’s your royal responsibility to make sure there’s a Hawkins in the morning.”

“Get this shit off my face,” Billy says.

Ronan shakes his head. “Princess,” he accuses, as the others crowd up behind them. They’re carrying gas cans, Billy realizes. The kids. Steve Harrington has a bat with nails sticking out of it.

“Go to hell,” Billy says.

Ronan laughs. “We are.”

- - -

When this is all over, if he’s smart, if he’s still alive, Steve will throw him out of his house. He should’ve thrown Ronan off his property and out of his life when he found him sleeping in the garden shed last November. Ronan’s been slowly toxic to the ecosystem of Steve’s life in damn near every way he can be.

And now he’s leading four kids and Billy Hargrove on what might be a suicide mission, and Steve’s coming along because nobody dies alone on Steve’s watch.

Sometimes, there are no good choices. Usually, around Steve, Ronan tries to make the least bad one. But right now, he’s selfish and angry, back in the Lab, bloodying his fists against the walls because that’s all there is to do.

Eleven went to close the gate. Eleven is always doing all the terrible work Ronan won’t do. Can’t do. Refuses to do, because fuck anyone for ever asking him for anything.

Ronan doesn't even know if he *could* close the gate. He could try to Dream it that way, but Eleven's a force, and Ronan's a doorway. It's just as likely that the creature will use him the same way it's been using Will, and Hopper was right when he said that Ronan is a lot more dangerous than Will Byers.

If she dies, he's going to take whatever sedative they have left and send himself as deep as he can go, so whatever he does, however much he can change, he won't work to the surface for a very long time. He can't bring anything back if he can't make his way home.

He doesn't know what'll happen if he dies over there. Wounds transfer just fine, but maybe that's because he believes in them. Does anyone ever actually believe they're dying? Does anyone believe they're dead?

Will El believe it, when it happens to her?

He doesn't want her to die. She's just a kid. She spent every year of her life but one in the lab, and her one year of freedom was spent hiding in the woods.

She deserves better. She always did. She's walking into a deathtrap, and, whatever chance he can give her, whatever time he can buy, he'll do it. He'll take Billy, and he'll take these kids, and he'll take Steve, and they'll buy her time.

If he were braver, maybe he'd go alone. But he spent so much time alone. He doesn't want to die that way.

When they're all in the tunnel, Ronan hands Billy a flashlight and a gas can. "Stay behind me," he says, as he takes out his gun. "Keep the light out in front."

"What the fuck is this?" Billy says. He's getting less and less dopey around the eyes. Ronan doesn't know if that's adrenaline kicking in or the medication wearing off. Could be both.

He could be a problem. Ronan knew that when he carried him to the car.

But he wasn't going to leave him in the Byers' house, whole place

smelling like everyone the shadow monster wants dead. Unprepared, uncoordinated, unconscious, unarmed. Alone.

He doesn't know what's more dangerous, the Byers' house or the tunnels. When he made the decision, he was thinking about his dad in the driveway, blood halfway to the street, dying alone ten feet from the door.

When he made the decision, he was thinking about himself. Jesus, isn't he always?

- - -

Last time, it was Nancy and Jonathan, and, even then, Steve thought they were too young. Now he's having a gasoline splashfight with what might be some kind of living hivemind, and his allies in this fight are four children and two teenage degenerates.

They're a *mess*.

Two out of the three semi-adults in this group have visible bruises acquired from one of the others. Three out of three have injured one of the others in the past hour.

But there wasn't much cohesion last time, either. Panic makes for strange bedfellows.

"Steve," Ronan says. The gas cans are empty.

"Yeah," Steve says. The smells down here are making him dizzy. Although that could just be the concussion. He wants to lean against the nearest tunnel wall, but like hell is he touching anything he doesn't have to in this place. "Yeah, okay. Everyone, get back."

The kids crowd up behind him, and Ronan herds Billy back with a hand on his shoulder that Billy keeps trying to dodge away from. Billy's eyes keep drifting toward the bones. He'd stopped for a full fifteen seconds when he found the first skull. He's been quiet since

then, seems especially wary of Ronan and his gun.

What is Steve supposed to tell him about this later?

Well, there's a good chance there won't be a *later*.

That's the spirit, he thinks, maybe a bit hysterically. *Maybe we'll all die down here, and I won't have to lie to anyone ever again.*

Not that lying to Billy Hargrove will be a hardship, since Steve sure as hell doesn't owe him the truth. But a convincing lie requires a good sell, and Steve's not sure he'll be able to look Billy in the eyes for a long time.

He's still not sure what was worse: the way he felt when his fist connected with Billy's face or that sick, swooping second between when his head hit the floor and Billy's arm pulled back.

But, fortunately, there's not really any time to think about that now.

As soon as everyone's behind him, he throws the lighter. The whole place stinks of blood and death and gasoline, and then it doesn't smell like anything but heat.

For a second, he's dazed. By the flash, by the warmth. And then Ronan steps back from his side, hand coming up in a fist he presses to his chest, like he's trying to hold his ribs together. His head bows forward; Steve thinks maybe Ronan's going to be sick.

"We gotta go," Ronan says, voice tight. "*Now*."

- - -

These kids are a pack of serial killers. Satanists, maybe. Billy doesn't fucking know. He counted seven skulls in that tunnel. Human skulls. *Seven*.

And now they're torching the evidence, and Billy's either an

accessory or a witness or a future victim, and he's not sure why the hell they're running, but he knows he doesn't want to be left behind. Whatever's going to happen to him, he wants to see it coming.

The alien's something of a surprise.

"Jesus *shit*," he says. He grabs Max by the back of her stupid green denim jacket, and he hauls her bodily behind him.

"Billy, what the fuck," she says, hand on his side, trying to push around him.

Billy doesn't even know why he put her there. He didn't think about it. Something brainstem-deep caught sight of the hairless four-legged dinosaur with the *peel apart face* and its only solution was to throw Max behind him so it would *eat him first*.

"Dart?" Dustin says. And then the lunatic, the curly-haired suicidal madman, steps forward, steps *toward* the creature, and Billy wonders if these are the kind of perks Satanist serial killers get, if this is a demon or a hellhound.

"Dustin," Steve hisses, "*get back here.*"

He cocks that bat back like he's going to swing straight through the creature's face, and Ronan has his gun pointed center mass, so Billy figures this isn't their hellhound. Whatever this is, there's a good chance it's going to attack.

Billy has nothing. He has a flashlight.

He shifts closer to Ronan, dragging Max along with him. Ronan, eyes still on the creature, seems to move without thinking, puts his shoulder against Billy's.

"What the fuck," Billy whispers.

"It's fine," Ronan says, when it very clearly is not. "'s just one of them."

There's something about the way he says *just one* that is almost relieved, which is interesting, because *relieved* is the opposite of how

it makes Billy feel.

That tone implies that there are more of these things, that he came down here *expecting* more.

Dustin, who has clearly lost touch with reality, is pulling a candy bar out of his backpack, and no one's stopping him. Probably because no one else wants to get eaten first. Maybe, by the time it's done chewing through all that hair, it'll have too much indigestion to eat everyone else.

It's going to cough up a hairball of body parts, Dustin's curls and Steve's hands and Ronan's white teeth.

The flashlight feels impossibly light in Billy's hands. Feels like nothing, like a toy.

"Give me the gun," Billy says. He's never fired a gun, but a gun he doesn't know how to use is better than empty hands that've never stopped anything.

"Take my knife," Ronan murmurs back. "Front pocket. Left side. Don't fucking stab me."

Billy's tempted to grope him as he goes for the knife. *That*, he thinks, in a very calm voice in his head, *is hysteria*.

He finds the knife clipped to Ronan's pocket. It makes a comforting mechanical *click* when the blade opens.

Dustin feeds nougat to the monster, and the monster goes after it like a dog stealing dropped hotdogs at a cookout. *These fucking kids*, Billy thinks. No wonder Sinclair wasn't scared of him. Look at their after-school activities.

Dustin waves them past, and they all go, shuffling carefully through the cramped tunnel. Billy keeps Max on his right, and Ronan stays on Billy's left, and they make it past the nightmare and up the tunnel, and Billy's trying to tell himself the kids shot him up with some kind of psychedelic.

"Am I high?" he asks Ronan.

“You can be anything you want,” Ronan tells him. “I believe in you.”

Shit, maybe Billy *is* gonna stab him.

The kids are crawling up the rope out of the hole in the ground when Billy hears it. A rushing sound, like hundreds of heavy footfalls coming their way, strange squeaks and squeals echoing out of the dark.

“Shit,” Steve says, under his breath. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Billy spent all this time trying to make Steve Harrington flinch. In retrospect, that effort wasn’t worth the payoff. He should’ve found something better to do.

“What is that?” he asks. But he doesn’t want to know.

“Come on, come *on*,” Mike’s saying. He and Max are belly down on the ground above them, reaching down for Lucas who’s halfway up the rope. Mike gets Lucas by the arm, and Max grabs his shirt, and they haul him up.

Dustin hasn’t even started climbing yet. No way that mop-haired mess is going to make it. Billy can tell in one look that he doesn’t have the upper body strength to scale that rope fast enough.

But Billy can’t go until Dustin’s already gone, so he drops his knife and flashlight, grabs the kid under the knees, and heaves him into the air. Dustin screams, high-pitched and startled, a girlish shriek Billy hopes he’ll get to laugh at him for later. Max grabs his arm up near the shoulder, and Dustin gets his elbows hooked over the lip of the hole, feet kicking against the dirt wall, half-in and half-out of the tunnel.

Beside him, Billy’s half-aware of Ronan doing something similar with Steve, lifting him just high enough that Steve can grab the rope most of the way up and scramble the rest of the way out.

“Ronan,” Steve’s saying, swinging around, reaching down. He sounds panicked, terrified. “*Ronan*.”

But Billy can hear them. Jesus, he can *feel* them, the ground shaking

beneath his feet.

When Steve drops his bat, it's for Billy, who catches it and swings around, faces whatever the hell is coming.

Ronan's in front of him, drawn up, gun in his hand.

He doesn't even have time to shoot. Billy doesn't have time to swing. They're too fast.

He plants his feet. He doesn't get bowled over.

Dozens and dozens of monsters run by, showing hundreds and hundreds of teeth, and nothing takes a bite out of them.

When the last one disappears out of the light, the bat drops from Billy's numb fingers. His heart is heaving in his chest; his lips feel like they're buzzing. "I hate this town," he says. "What the fuck is going on? You people do this shit every fall?"

Ronan blinks. He looks over his shoulder toward Billy, which is when Billy realizes that Ronan moved with the monsters, tried to keep Billy behind him.

"Yeah," Ronan says, "more or less."

"I'm going back to California," Billy tells him.

Ronan laughs. He puts his gun away, grabs the knife from the dirt. "Oh, don't be like that. If you promise not to choke out any of the kids, you can stay in the car at our next stop."

"Next stop," Billy repeats. "*Next* stop?"

"Relax," Ronan advises, which has to be the least helpful thing he's ever said. "All we have to do is go figure out if we're all gonna die or not."

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

Fair warning: I have a deadline for another fic coming up, so I have to take some time off from this one. I should be back in August!

Ronan likes the car. It's loud as hell, and fussy, and he has to bully it a bit to get it into gear, but Steve never lets him drive the BMW the way he's driving the Camaro. "Hey, Billy," he says, as they slide through another curve on the twisty road out to the Lab, "you really gotta get this clutch replaced."

"Well, I fucking do *now*," Billy says. "Show some fucking respect."

Ronan laughs. He shows absolutely zero respect. Who the hell knows what's waiting for them at the Lab? He might as well have a good time getting them there.

There's some chatter from the radio, and then Dustin leans forward. "They fixed Will," he says.

"*Fixed* Will?" Billy repeats. "The fuck does that mean?"

Surliness aside, he's handling things pretty well, Ronan thinks. Hell, the first time Ronan Dreamed his way into meeting monsters, he threw up on his bed and then tried to strangle the nurse that came in to clean it up. Maybe Billy's good in a crisis.

Maybe Billy's *only* good in a crisis.

"One of the kids got possessed by a demon from another dimension," Ronan tells him.

"Fuck you," Billy says.

"You *asked*, shithead," Dustin says, with a charming amount of loyalty for a kid picking a fight Ronan's going to have to finish for him.

Billy twists around in his seat fast enough that Dustin flinches back, loses his balance, ends up landing in Lucas' lap with an undignified yelp. There's a scramble in the backseat as all five occupants try to sort themselves out, but it ends with Lucas wrapping an arm around Dustin's chest and popping his head over his shoulder to glower at Billy.

It's fucking adorable, is what it is. The way those kids look after each other.

Ronan had friends when he was thirteen, too. But he doesn't know any of those guys anymore.

"Hey," Steve says, one hand up, tone all stern and warning.

And that's cute, too. The way Steve never really learned how to read when someone's playing at aggression. The way he can't tell, just by looking at Billy's hands, that he isn't actually planning to throw any punches.

"You watch your mouth," Billy says, to Dustin. "Don't teach my stepsister any dirty words."

"Oh, fuck off, Billy!" Max says, immediately.

There's a beat of silence and then Billy points at Dustin. "I'm blaming that one on you."

The rearview mirror almost can't contain her expression of incredulous rage. "I learned it," she says, "from *you*."

Billy shakes his head. He turns back around, slumps in his seat. Ronan notices that he's opted to wear a seatbelt this time, but he chooses not to view that as an indictment of his driving. "Kids these days," Billy says, "Smoking cigarettes, worshipping Satan. Wait til your mom finds out you were torching skeletons in Slaughter Cavern back there instead of doing your fucking math homework."

"You can't tell *anyone* about this," Steve says. He sways forward, bowling the sprawled limbs of four separate preteens out of the way as he lodges himself over the center console.

“Bullshit I can’t, Harrington,” Billy says. “Max has been missing for *hours*. What do you want me to tell our parents? ‘Don’t worry, Dad, we only burned one crime scene. I got her home before the Satanic orgy in the woods.’”

“*Orgy*,” Dustin repeats, voice cracking right down the middle.

“I’m fucking serious, Hargrove,” Steve says. “These people are insane. We had to sign— if they know we told you--”

“We didn’t tell him shit, Steve,” Ronan says. Mostly they just showed him.

“Why don’t you tell everyone?” Mike says. He’s got his pitbull face on. It must be hereditary, because Nancy trots out that same look whenever she gets a gun in her hands. “Why don’t you just go tell everyone, and then the bad guys will find you, and you’ll fucking disappear out of our town?”

It’s a strange faultline, but Ronan tracks it anyway. This time, when Billy turns around, he’s almost ready to swing.

“This is *my* fucking town,” Billy says. “And I’m not scared of any ‘bad guys.’”

When Ronan cuts the engine, silence hits like a slap to the face. They all turn, in unison, to stare at the Lab, with its shattered doors, the flashing emergency lights. Ronan made sure to park so that the mess of Joyce Byers’ boyfriend would still be out of sight from the car.

He can see the blood, though. But maybe only because he knows where to look.

He doesn’t know how to make calls like these. Nobody showed him how to graph this out in his half a semester of geometry. How do you park a car to minimize trauma to the children in the backseat while also maximizing the chances of making it back to the car if you have to run?

He may have erred on the side of trauma, though, because Billy’s staring at the blood, too.

Billy's makes a noise in the back of his throat, a soft sound, like all the air has just shuddered out of his lungs. "What the hell is this place?" he asks.

Ronan shoves the car door open. However shaky his trauma math might be, he knows damn well that, if he doesn't hit escape velocity right now, he's never leaving the car.

He turns back when his boots are planted on asphalt, leans in so he can look Billy in the eyes. "This is the place where the bad guys kept me in a cage for three years after they made me disappear," he says. Which maybe misrepresents the situation a little, but it's important that Billy develop some appreciation for the precarious nature of his situation.

The truth is Ronan doesn't know what they'll do to Billy if he starts running his mouth around town. They won't keep him in a cage for three years. They probably won't see much reason to keep him at all.

"What the fuck," Billy says. His eyebrows pull together, blue eyes tracking across Ronan's face.

"Wasn't a great place," Ronan tells him. "They used to promise to give me solid food if I'd be good."

Billy blinks and then blinks again. Something passes behind his eyes, but Ronan doesn't know if it's pity or calculation.

"Don't worry, Billy," he says. And he leans in, pats him on the cheek, smiles when Billy smacks his hand away. "Looks like they're all just solid food now."

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Steve should try to stop Ronan from going into the Lab. He should've stopped all of this before it happened. But arguing with Ronan about whatever reckless bullshit he's planning is usually as productive as arguing with a train about its tracks.

Steve doesn't control Ronan. Hell, he's not even sure *Ronan* controls Ronan.

"Damn it, Ronan, wait up," Steve says, hurrying across the parking lot to catch up.

The kids are back in the car. Max is in the driver's seat. She has the keys. Steve doesn't know why Billy Hargrove isn't taking this opportunity to take the car, ditch the kids, and drive away, but he'd climbed out of the car when Steve did and now he's following right along beside him as they jog after Ronan.

"No real reason for you to go in, Steve," Ronan says. "If Eleven didn't stop this thing—"

"Yeah, then it's you," Steve says. Because he's not a fucking idiot. He's been tracking that possibility since he woke up in the back of Billy Hargrove's car and saw that Ronan had come back from wherever the hell he'd been. Seeing him had been a relief, at first. But then he understood what it meant. "Yeah, I *know*, Ronan."

Ronan steps through the open space where the door used to be. Bob Newby's in pieces to their right.

"Jesus," Steve says. He closes his eyes, but it doesn't help. The darkness makes him feel like something's coming right for him, hungry and hidden and getting closer.

He opens his eyes again. Ronan's studying his face.

"There's gonna be a lot of that, Steve," Ronan says. He points at Bob when he says it. *A lot of that*, like Bob's just roadkill.

"Don't," Steve says and then shakes his head. His jaw tightens up, and he forces it to relax. "Don't talk about him that way, Ronan. I *knew* him."

Ronan sighs. "Probably be helpful if you pretended you didn't." He gestures with his chin toward the door on the other side of Bob's body. "Cuz we've gotta get down those stairs."

"I can't just pretend that— fuck *off*, Ronan," Steve says. Sometimes,

he can see every jagged edge of Ronan's humanity, and sometimes it's like there's nothing human left in him at all. "What the hell is wrong with you? How many dead bodies have *you* seen?"

Ronan huffs out a breath. Aggravated, maybe impatient. "I cut up my *own* dead body, Steve. Guttled myself like—"

Billy throws up.

Steve yelps, startled, adrenalin running so high that he damn near swings the bat at Billy's head just for making the noise. That wet splatter like a slit throat, the sound and *smell* of—

"Oh fuck," Steve says, and presses his palm to his mouth. He swallows back a surge of bile. "Oh my God."

Billy writhes again, violently.

Ronan stares at them, mouth hanging open in disbelief. "Get back in the car," he says. "Both of you. I'm taking Mike and Lucas instead."

Billy straightens up, wipes his wrist across his mouth. He shakes his head, and his hair, guided by the unerring hands of extra firm hairspray, resettles perfectly into place. If the puddle of puke wasn't literally inches from his boots, Steve wouldn't believe he'd ever been sick at all.

"Sorry," Billy says, with a crooked smile.

"No, that's great," Ronan says. He throws an arm toward the door to the stairs. "You can go first. If you see any monsters, just start puking. Their immune systems can't be ready for that."

Billy rolls his eyes and steps around the mess on the floor. He moves to stand over Bob's body. "So that guy's dead as hell, huh?" he asks. And he looks a little pale, but otherwise he might as well be in somebody's backyard, waiting for his chance to do a kegstand.

"Yeah," Steve says, faintly. "Pretty fucking dead, Hargrove."

Steve's starting to think maybe he's never been able to read Billy. He figured Billy wore every ugly thought on the sleeves of whatever shirt

he currently had gaping open to his navel, but the dissonance between the vomit on the floor and the casual interest on his face indicts that there might be hidden depths to Billy Hargrove.

At the very least, he's better at hiding his emotions than Steve would've guessed.

"Look," Ronan says. "It's gonna be a fucking butchershop the farther down we go, so if you two--"

"Then what's the holdup, princess?" Billy asks. "Looks like you're the one we're waiting on." He turns and heads for the door, pulls it open and steps through like he has any idea where he's going, and Steve's moving without thinking, following after him.

He passes Ronan on the way. He thinks, as he does it, that it's fucking weird.

"Ronan, c'mon," he says.

"I wanna see how far he goes," Ronan says, squinting at the door. "I bet he's two steps down, waiting for us."

And Steve might be coming to terms with the fact that he barely knows Billy, but he still knows him better than *that*. "Bullshit, he's gonna be halfway to the basement levels by now."

Ronan blinks. Tips his head. Presses his lips into a thin line that looks angry but really just means he's trying not to smile. "Goddamn it," he says. "You're probably right."

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There's blood in the hallway, and blood on the stairs, and blood on the bottoms of Billy's boots. Every step squeaks on the linoleum like the death cries of some small animal, like he's crushing mice with every downward tread. He can't think about anything else. Just those small noises, and all the blood.

The smell of it, the taste. Penny-chewing red.

He's thinking about California. He's thinking about breathing in wet, coughing up red.

He's thinking about blood.

"Billy," someone calls, two flights up. Maybe three. It echoes down to him, incredulous and impatient, and that's Steve Harrington. Bitchy and perplexed, like he always is whenever he's talking to Billy.

The throaty laugh that follows, rattling and low, is Ronan.

"Goddamn it," Ronan says, "I hate it when you're right."

There's a crumpled mess of meat in a lab coat on the next landing, and Billy's stomach is rolling in his belly, doing flips and spins that would make a rhythmic gymnast jealous. He half-jogs past, and he doesn't know when he started moving faster, but it's a ramp-up he can't turn down.

When his feet hit the next set of stairs, he's running.

Sometimes the only way to make it through is to put your head down and move as fast as possible. Can't stop you if they can't catch you. Can't hurt you if they can't grab you.

"Oh, motherfuck," Ronan says, "this asshole's getting in some jogging practice."

"It's basketball season, Ronan. Cardio's important," Steve snips back, and Billy laughs like a bear trap snapping shut, fast and loud and unexpected. It surprises him so much that he misses a step and slams his shoulder into the wall, stumbles and scrambles his way down to the next landing.

There's another mess in a lab coat, but this one's alive.

"Oh, hello," he says, staring up at Billy. "If you're here to loot the place, you're in for a heck of a shock."

Billy gets his balance back and takes in the sight of the guy's

mincemeat leg and the belt strapped around his thigh. “Oh,” he says. And then, “This one’s alive.” His tips his head back, calls it up to the other two.

There’s a brief silence and then loud, rushed footsteps and suddenly Ronan’s rounding the corner with a look on his face that Billy doesn’t know.

He thinks it’s fear, but it probably shouldn’t have so many teeth.

Whatever it is evaporates fast, though, and Ronan comes to a stop a few feet from the guy, shouldered up next to Billy. “Huh,” he says, squinting. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Good evening, Mr. Lynch,” the man says, with a jovial little wave and what Billy thinks is probably a strategic repositioning of that pistol in his hand. “We’re having a reunion tonight, I see.”

“Oh, that’s cute,” Ronan says. “So you bastards knew I had a real name the whole time, huh?”

“I wasn’t part of Dr. Brenner’s tenure,” he says. “Nor do I agree with his activities.”

Ronan’s face twitches at *Dr. Brenner*. Billy knows a weak point when he sees one, can’t stop himself from asking, “Who’s Dr. Brenner?”

“The former Director of Operations,” the man says.

“Fucking lunatic,” Ronan clarifies. “Really wanted the kidnapped minors he imprisoned to call him ‘Papa.’”

“What the fuck,” Billy says.

“Your tax dollars at work,” Ronan says. “Anyway, Doc, we’ve got a shitty, ungrateful world to save. Did El and Hopp come through here?”

The man considers Ronan like maybe he’s struggling to reconcile the disgust evident in Ronan’s voice when he talks about the world with the fact that he is here, allegedly, to save it.

Billy's not sure what the hell they're doing here, honestly. He lost the thread of the evening when he saw a human skull in a cave and watched a pack of feral twelve-year-olds soak the place down with gasoline.

Or maybe he lost it when Ronan tried to get his hand in his pants.

Honestly, now that he's looking back, it's possible he lost the thread of things the moment Ronan stepped out of Steve Harrington's front door.

"Sure," the man says, finally. "Came through about half an hour ago. Heard a lot of gunshots until about ten minutes back. Haven't heard much of anything since."

"Great," Ronan says. And then he turns on his heels, shoulders past Billy, and takes off down the stairs at a run. Billy follows him, because if he stands here looking at all the blood on this guy's clothes and the yawning hole in his leg, he's going to puke again.

And Steve follows after them because apparently Steve Harrington is down for what-the-fuck-ever as long as nobody's having a good time.

If Billy had known the troubles involved in being Keg King of this town, he would've taken up sobriety at the city limits. Or at least switched exclusively to whiskey.

They pick their way through to the lowest floor, stepping over things Billy decides not to think about. Everything gets quiet and heavy, and nothing's felt right since Billy's eyes caught on that first body, but this place feels worse the deeper they go, like they're leaving everything they know and understand behind them.

Like they're going into another world, Billy thinks. If that world didn't want them.

Which, whatever. It's not like Billy's own world wants him, either.

"You lived here?" Billy asks, staring at the back of Ronan's neck.

That tattoo is peaking over the collar of his shirt, black ink stretching

over the jut of bone. Billy watches the way it shifts when Ronan shakes his head like he's trying to dislodge a bad thought.

"Two floors up," Ronan says. "Interior room."

No windows. No exterior vents. Just recycled air and industrial lighting. Like living your whole life in a hospital waiting room.

"Jesus," Ronan says, when they reach the last door. He rests his head against the metal, breathes in. Billy stares at the stretch of his shoulders, the rise and fall of his chest. For one long moment, Ronan doesn't move, and Steve presses up against Billy's back, but they don't move forward either.

"I'm gonna be so pissed," Ronan says, quiet and intent, like he's praying out loud. "So *fucking* pissed if I die here. Fuck you."

And then he yanks the door open and steps through. And Billy and Steve follow after.

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Neil Hargrove answers the door like a father who's been expecting the police to deliver his missing son to his door at three in the morning for at least the past sixteen years. "Officer," he says, "what the hell's he done now?"

Jim takes that a little personally. It's no one's fault. Jim could tell in one look that Billy Hargrove had a history of less-than-exemplary behavior. The complex machinations involved in his hairstyle were enough to throw up a red flag, and that was before Jim understood that they kid had intentionally left his shirt gaping wide open like a flashy *disembowel here* sign for every demo-dog on the wrong side of the Gate.

So, sure, the kid's trouble. Sure, Jim had spotted a half-empty bottle of truly horrendous vodka in the trunk of the Camaro as they loaded up to leave the Lab. Sure, there's probably any number of perfectly

justifiable reasons for Neil Hargrove to throw his door open and glare like Billy's the last thing he wants to see right now.

But he almost never saw his son again.

Because every single one of these kids almost died tonight. *Should've* died tonight. Even this one, who Jim hadn't even met until he showed up at the Lab with Steve and Ronan. Even this one, who Jim can't quite pinpoint the provenance of, can't get any kind of straight answer out of anyone as to how or when the group acquired him in the first place.

As far as he can tell, Billy's here because Max is here. Which means he was just a stepbrother who went out looking for his stepsister, and he damn near got butchered by monsters from the wrong Goddamn dimension.

"Good morning, Mr. Hargrove," Jim says, because this isn't the time or place to start yelling at anyone about how everyone's supposed to be dead. Nobody gives a shit what homecoming soldiers have lived through. They never do. "Sorry to disturb you so early. I wanted to make sure your children got home safe. There's been an accident down at the Lab."

And it's interesting, really, the way Billy's standing next to him. So tense. Prey-animal still. This is the same kid who'd sprawled out across the hood of his car like he couldn't be fucked to deal with anything while the rest of them gathered in the parking lot, trying to talk through what they'd just survived.

This was the kid who'd shoved his hands into Ronan's pant's pocket, fished out a lighter, grinned around his cigarette like he knew damn well that Ronan broke fingers for that kind of casual invasion of his personal space.

This was the kid who didn't bother to hide his scabbed-up knuckles while Nancy and Joyce hissed and cooed over the bruised-up spectacle someone had made out of Steve Harrington's face.

"Hey, Mom," Max says, squeezing past Neil to get to an alarmed, wide-eyed redhead standing behind him. "I'm fine," she says.

“An accident,” Neil repeats. He doesn’t move when Max sidesteps by him, doesn’t shift to give her more space. His eyes, Jim notes, have been stuck on Billy’s face for the past sixty seconds. “I’ve been trying to talk to him about his reckless driving. He’s not great at listening.”

The longer Jim stands here, the more things shift in his head. He’s starting to develop a few theories as to why Max had slunk over to him while the others were busy, had muttered to him out of the side of her mouth. “Can you take us home? Can you— Billy’s dad. Can you tell him where we were? Some story, or something?”

He’ll probably have to talk to all of the parents eventually. He hadn’t planned to talk to any of them until at least sunup, but he hadn’t known this kid well enough to call whether it could be left until later. He’s glad, now, that he’d left Eleven with Ronan at the Byers’ house, followed these two home.

He’s glad he’s here to spin this. He has this idea that it might be good to establish a baseline with Neil Hargrove.

He clears his throat, gets Neil’s eyes back on his face. They share a look between them, and Jim knows these things have limits, but he does his best to convey the message anyway. *I’m here. I’m paying attention. I know what shape your son was in when I dropped him off.*

“Billy wasn’t involved in the accident. He stopped to render aid.”

“Did he?” Neil Hargrove gives Billy a look like he suspects Billy didn’t so much stop to render aid as he did to check for unattended valuables. “Well, that’s wildly out of character.”

Jim’s had a very long night tacked onto the end of a very long week which had immediately followed a very long couple of decades. He wants to grab Neil Hargrove by the throat and shake him. He wants to tell him what it’s like, burying your own child. He wants to tell him that he almost died tonight standing next to the thirteen-year-old girl he’s been looking after for a year, and how he’d been hoping, in the selfish, scared part of his mind, that, when they died, he’d at least get to go first this time.

He wants to tell him how close it was, how fast Bob Newby died. One

fuck up, one flare of bad luck, one wrong choice on the flowchart of fate, and Billy Hargrove would've been just another casualty the Feds had to figure out how to sell.

Billy's supposed to be dead. And, regardless of how much he knew before he signed on, he's supposed to be dead because he chose to stay with the people who were trying to keep Neil Hargrove and the rest of this town and this whole damn world alive.

Jim smiles. He knows, when he does it, that there's something a little unhinged about it. Maybe it's the way he can't quite get his teeth to stop grinding together. "Well," he says, "you never really know how people are gonna act in high pressure situations, do you?"

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Hopper takes off to escort Billy and Max home, and Eleven falls asleep on Ronan's shoulder within five minutes. "Poor thing," Joyce says, and she tucks a blanket around Eleven, like Ronan's not the one suffering, trapped by the trivial weight of a snoring kid who clearly hasn't washed her hair in a few days.

Steve's passed out on the other side of the couch, mouth open, clutching a tiny pillow to his chest. He'd spent fifteen minutes in the Byers' kitchen, getting fussed over and patched up. He's got what has to be at least half the contents of Joyce Byers' first aid kit affixed to his face. He looks ridiculous. He looks like a burn victim.

Ronan has no idea why Eleven chose to pass out on *him* when there's a much better option not three feet away.

"There's no accounting for taste," Ronan says, to no one. To Joyce, maybe, since she's the only one still awake.

Will had been stumbling-tired when they trooped back inside, clinging to Jonathan with his eyes half-closed. Jonathan dumped him into his bed and set up a sleeping bag on the floor, and Ronan had gotten so pissed and so keyed up about it that he'd had to go outside

and pretend he was too polite to smoke in Joyce's house.

It's not Jonathan, and it's not Will. It's just that he remembered being small enough that Declan used to look after him. And he'll never be that small again.

Eleven is, though. She's so fucking small. All bird-boned and bug-eyed, still weighing in somewhere in the double-digits.

She washed her face in the Byers' bathroom, but there's still a bit of dried blood around her nose.

It doesn't hurt, Dreaming. Even when he pulls things out of Dreams, it doesn't *hurt*. Just like electricity doesn't really hurt. It lights up his insides until his brain and his bones and his blood screams *no* in any way they can, but what he does when he Dreams isn't something his body evolved to understand.

Pain is the body's warning system. There's no warning system for what Ronan does.

The pain sets in after, though. Sometimes. A deep, dull ache in his joints, a pain in his skull like someone's inside it with a hacksaw and dreams of freedom. Right now, there's a muted pounding at his temples, but it's hard to say whether that's from Dreaming that bike into existence or just from the overall shitshow of the evening.

Anyway, he's doing better than Eleven is. Someday, he thinks, they're gonna burn her battery out.

So he lets her sleep, even though she snores, and she's still out when Hopper comes back, which means Ronan has to weather the *look* he gets, all amused and indulgent.

Ronan makes peace with the fact that he's going to have to commit five to seven acts of criminal mischief to reassert the rightful balance, get Hopper to look at him like he's a problem too obnoxious to solve.

"I'll get her," Hopper says, as he leans down to scoop up Eleven. "You get Steve."

Ronan thinks about picking him up and throwing him over his

shoulder in a fireman's carry, but he figures, given the nature of their evening, the odds are high that Steve would wake up screaming the moment he found himself airborne. So he opts to shake him instead, one hand loosely curled around Steve's shoulder, saying, "Hey, Steve, get up, c'mon," until Steve's eyes flutter open and focus on his face.

"What is it?" Steve asks, slurring it all together, blinking sleepily at Ronan.

"C'mon," Ronan repeats. "Hopp's gonna drive us back to your house."

Steve looks around him at the perfectly serviceable bed he's made from of pillows and Hopper's jacket. And then he sighs, runs his hand down his face, and levers himself halfway up. Ronan pulls him the rest of the way to his feet.

"We gotta start this shit earlier next time," he says, mumbling it into Ronan's shoulder as he stumbles along behind him. "No more monster killing in the dark. Fuck this. We're in bed by ten next year, I mean it."

"Yeah, yeah," Ronan says, working his arm around Steve's waist so he can half-carry him down the stairs of Joyce's front porch. "I'll be sure to schedule that for you."

"Thanks," Steve says.

Eleven's already buckled into the passenger seat, so Ronan hauls Steve into the back of the Bronco, and Steve's asleep again in seconds, slumped into Ronan's side. Hopper smirks when he sees it, but he doesn't say anything until he's walking the two of them to Steve's front door.

"We actually can probably handle this part," Ronan says.

"Sure," Hopper says, and walks with them anyway.

"Jesus Christ," Ronan says, but it's helpful to have him around when Ronan's trying to wrestle the door open without dropping Steve on his face.

“So,” Hopper says, as Ronan’s trying to elbow Steve into consciousness so they can cross the threshold and go to bed, “Hargrove’s dad. He an asshole?”

Ronan squints at him and tries to figure out when, exactly, Hopper thinks he got to the *meet the parents* stage. “I mean, if you subscribe to Mendel’s law of inheritance, probably so.”

Hopper rolls his eyes like maybe he wasn’t looking for a discussion about genetics at four in the morning. But if that’s the case, Ronan has no idea why he brought it up.

“Uh-huh,” he says. “Okay. Well. Goodnight, Ronan. Call me if anything happens.”

“Sure,” Ronan says. “I always report all of my most interesting personal developments to the nearest convenient law enforcement officer.”

Hopper pinches the bridge of his nose and laughs. “Sure am glad you survived, kid,” he says.

But, somehow, the way he says it, it’s almost like he means it.

Ronan drags Steve over the threshold and kicks the door shut before he feels obligated to react to that. “Come on, Stevie,” he says. “Shit’s getting weird. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, with unprecedented enthusiasm. He reaches over, locks the deadbolt, and then begins the long, treacherous climb to his bedroom. Ronan assists.

Steve shows a burst of energy once he catches sight of his bed, takes two fast shuffling steps forward and then launches himself, lands starfished out over his covers.

“Fuck’s sake,” Ronan says. He turns on the bedside lamp that Steve leaves on at night and then grabs Steve’s right ankle, starts taking off his shoe.

“What’re you doing?” Steve asks, mumbling it into his pillow.

“Being a fucking saint,” Ronan informs him. He throws Steve’s right shoe over his shoulder and then catches his left ankle, gets to work.

“Was so worried about you,” Steve tells him. He’s dazed and vague around the eyes. His hair’s a mess, looks soft. “When you disappeared.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Ronan says. He’s going to be thinking about that for a long time. That ride through the darkness, dozens of demo-dogs behind him, trying to keep them on him. It turned out that being alone in the dark wasn’t much better than being alone in a brightly lit, empty room.

“Don’t go away again,” Steve says.

And Ronan can’t promise him that. “Be better for you if I do.”

“No,” Steve says. And he can’t mean it. He can’t be thinking it through. But he *sounds* like he means it. He flops over, pushes himself up on his elbows. “Ronan,” he says, like he’s hurt. “Don’t leave.”

And Ronan knows that he should, because it’s just going to get harder from here. But he’s tired, and the Gate’s closed, and, if anywhere and anytime is safe, he’s safe right here, for now.

“Yeah, okay,” he says. “I’ll be here, Steve. Just down the hall, okay? In your guest--”

“No,” Steve says. And he reaches over, fists his hand in Ronan’s shirt, and tugs. And Ronan’s always known that Steve’s strong, but it’s fascinating, the way Steve can move him, when he really means it. He drags Ronan right into his bed. “Just fucking— just *stay here*, Ronan. For tonight, okay? I don’t wanna— you were *gone*.”

Ronan disappeared for three years once, and nobody missed him the way Steve Harrington missed him when he was gone for two hours.

In the face of that, Ronan’s defenseless. He’d give Steve anything he asked for.

“Jesus,” he says. “Fine.”

He unties his boots, kicks them off. Ditches his shirt. Thinks about kicking out of his jeans, but decides against it.

When he lays down in the semi-dark next to Steve, he thinks about all the ways they could've died tonight. He thinks about the bruises on Steve's face. He thinks about Steve, reaching down to him, screaming his name, while the whole tunnel shook with the footsteps of any number of monsters.

He thinks about Steve, and his bat, and the steady sound of his footsteps, following Ronan right into hell.

When he shifts, he doesn't mean to crowd him. And maybe he doesn't. It's difficult to tell which of them moves first.

They fall asleep like a pair of parentheses, curled inwards, not quite touching. But close enough that they'd know, immediately, if something happened. Close enough that if something grabbed Steve, Ronan could pull him back before he got ripped away.

Author's Note:

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Title is a jumbled reference to "Bloodstains" by Agent Orange.